

The New Normal and the New Future

The New Normal

The habits of lockdown have become the new normal: staying home; social distancing if we need to venture out; meeting family and friends on screen rather than face to face; taking special care of people who are shielding. Lockdown culture has generated a renewed community spirit, whether we are clapping the NHS or collecting a prescription for an elderly neighbour. Lockdown routines have nudged us towards taking daily exercise by privileging this as a legitimate reason for going outdoors.

And of course lockdown *church* has discovered its own new normal.

A survey of Scottish Baptist churches by Baptist Union of Scotland in April 2020¹ revealed several characteristics that are becoming the new normal for churches during the Coronavirus crisis.

1. Mutual care appears to be increasing within churches. Members are contacting one another at an unprecedented level to check up on each other's well-being. Most ministers and pastoral teams have been systematically contacting everyone in the church, in many cases reaching out to people who have not experienced or expected a proactive pastoral contact. Beyond this, many others are taking it on themselves to phone or message people they do not normally contact to express support and encouragement.
2. Some form of online Sunday worship has become the norm for most of the churches. This may be a highly produced pre-edited presentation, a Zoom meeting or simple videos of pastors sharing a message from their studies. Ministers and others are rapidly up-skilling in digital presentation. Most churches record higher numbers of participants in their online worship than they would have expected at normal Sunday worship services.
3. Churches have mostly taken steps to support people in the wider community through schemes to offer friendly phone calls, shopping deliveries and pharmacy collections. Some churches have established their own independent projects but many are working in partnerships with local authorities or other community groups.
4. Finance has become an area of concern for churches. Reduced giving, due to the financial hardship of some members and the inability to pass round an offering plate, along with a loss of letting income for many, has forced churches to turn to their financial reserves and in some cases furlough staff, though very rarely ministers.

Crisis, Catastrophe and Emergency

Scripture shows us a pattern of life for the people of God where crises give rise to new patterns of community and mission. The dramatic departure from Egypt and miraculous

¹ All 161 churches in the Baptist Union of Scotland were invited to respond, via minister, secretary or treasurer. 86 responses were received from 78 churches (ie a few sent more than one response). 58% of respondents were ministers, 31% secretaries and 11% treasurers. 78 churches represent 48% of the total number of churches.

crossing of the Red Sea precipitate a transformation from a community organised for slavery to a nomadic existence seeking to be faithful to God in new territory. Similarly, the arrest and release of Peter and John in Acts 4 is the crisis that marks a transition for the church from 'enjoying the favour of all the people' to becoming a community under suspicion and prone to persecution.

We rightly refer to the current events as the Coronavirus *crisis*. The word crisis comes from a root meaning 'decision' or 'judgment'. It came into the English language partly through its use in medicine, where a crisis was the turning point in the progress of a disease; from the crisis point there would either be deterioration towards death or improvement towards recovered health. (This root meaning is still evident in the way we may speak of a patient's condition being 'critical'.) The challenge for the church is, in what way will the present crisis be a decision-point for us?

These times have also been described as a catastrophe. The word literally means an overturning. In the midst of the worldwide catastrophe many of our church practices have been turned upside down. Do we simply await a time when we can put things the right way up again? Or is this overturning more like someone turning over the soil in their garden, not so that they can then turn it back again but so that new things can be planted and grow in the overturned soil?

One other word used to describe these days is an emergency. Implicit in that word is the expectation that something will *emerge* from the disruption. Rather than awaiting the moment when we get back to the 'old normal', churches are rightly asking what might emerge from this season.²

Where Next for Baptist Churches?

There is certainly not a one-size-fits-all answer to this. There is no single route ahead. Each church will listen to the Spirit and seek to discern God's leading for that congregation. This will require honest reflection, imaginative creativity and bold action. As we begin planning for the post-lockdown future, consideration of the following areas will be unavoidable:

- Digital gatherings
- De-cluttering church
- Partnering in the community
- Daring to change
- New role-models
- Mutual care

1. Digital Gatherings

Meeting online may have seemed the preserve of geeks, gamers and senior staff in multinational organisations, but now it has been democratised. We have rapidly upskilled in

² Rebecca Solnit explores these themes in a [Guardian Long Read](#) published 7.4.20

this technology and raised our expectations of what is possible in the digital space. Churches have demonstrated remarkable creativity in crafting worship gatherings that are meaningful, powerful and widely inclusive. Baptist churches report that online participation is significantly exceeding previous physical attendance. Furthermore research commissioned by Tearfund revealed that 25% of adults claimed to have watched or listened to a religious service since the lockdown began, and for the 18-34 age-group this rose to 34%.³

Digital is not going away so what options do we have after lockdown?

- a. One bold step might be to plant online congregations. Using the skills we have acquired during lockdown many churches could now set some people apart to form an online congregation, who create their own digital worship gathering each week and explore further how this can be done with depth and engagement. This would be a space to welcome the many people we currently find casually visiting worship online. It would be a natural place to use our social media presence to invite others into and may be a gift for people whose routines or mobility make physical church attendance difficult. This is not without its challenges but for the sake of the gospel we may decide to work through these if by this means we can lead some people to Jesus.
- b. There may be a blended model of church. This could mean physically attending Sunday worship then having a midweek community or small group meeting online. This might be convenient for some though it would only be a small adjustment to a typical current model. A more adventurous blend would be to gather weekly online, be that Sunday or midweek, and then hold a physical gathering once a month. The latter might be the place for sharing food, sharing communion, baptisms and the laying on of hands – those deeply embodied practices that lend themselves least to an online expression.
- c. We could livestream or video our normal services, as a few churches already do. Whilst there may be some benefits to this (eg it is a better option for people who cannot leave their home than listening to an audio recording of the message later), it will not be the same as our current practice. The distinctive features of online worship now are that the speakers (and maybe singers) address the camera; they speak directly to the online congregation. This is quite different from a film of a worship gathering that other people are attending. Our present online gatherings assume that we are a dispersed community who are all participating in different locations, not spectators of some other community's gathering. Simply to video normal services would lack imagination and also be at risk of fuelling a consumerist culture.

Whatever we do, we cannot afford to ignore our discovery of the digital opportunities in the days ahead.

³ https://www.tearfund.org/en-SC/media/press_releases/many_brits_look_to_faith_during_lockdown/

2. De-cluttering Church

Lockdown has forced us to close the majority of our church activities. Beyond online Sunday worship and small groups, plus essential community services like foodbanks, our weekly programmes have largely paused. This gives us some thinking space to ask why we are doing these things and if this is the best use of our presence, gifts and resources.

We tend to be enthusiastic activists and when we identify a need we have the habit of starting a group or a meeting to address it. These things are usually well-conceived and certainly well-intentioned, but after a while they can take on a life of their own, such that we stop asking if they are the best way of fulfilling God's calling for this church. In some cases they may serve to keep us busy without bearing much fruit. In some cases they may occupy the time we might better spend among friends and neighbours, enjoying life with them and being witnesses through our deeds and words. Some activities may be enjoyable but not fruitful. Some may have become habitual but not purposeful. Some may have become a burden that we just need to lay down. Others may need a radical re-think and re-invention.

De-cluttering the church routine has three potential benefits. Firstly, there is a real danger that extra-busy church life keeps us from investing in real friendships with people outside the church community – a version of keeping our light under a bowl (Matthew 5.15). Secondly, de-cluttering creates a space for us to consider what 'few things are needed— or indeed only one' (Luke 10.42). Thirdly, during lockdown many in our Baptist community have been reading *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry* (by John Mark Comer) which emphasises the spiritual value in resisting the temptation to overcommit: 'One of the key tasks of our apprenticeship to Jesus is living into both our potential and our limitations' (p63).

3. Partnering in the Community

During lockdown many churches have found opportunities to step up to servanthood in partnership with other community groups or by informal coalitions with people of goodwill. Together we have risen to the challenge of shopping for people who are shielding, calling people who are isolated and watching over our neighbours and neighbourhoods.

In normal times our churches typically serve communities through programmes we set up and run. We are in control and tend to be in a provider-client relationship with others. This has the advantages of allowing us to staff activities with Christian believers, who probably pray together before starting work, and to respond to challenges of teamwork or practice with a Christian ethic. However, it can also place us in a position where we are doing things *to* others and *for* others rather than *with* them. There is nothing wrong with doing good things to and for people; but if we are seeking to spread like salt in our communities (Matthew 5.13) and be the 'pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing' (2 Corinthians 2:15), then it is wise to consider how we work *among* others and not just *for* them. Is it always best for the church to begin a project to meet a need we identify, or are there opportunities to partner with other people of goodwill

who are already addressing social needs? Perhaps in this context we will learn new things and our testimony will be more distinctive.⁴

Taking this one step further, lockdown has given us a fresh opportunity to recognise that all our scattered vocations in our workplaces, families and neighbourhoods are the location of ministry and mission. In normal times it has been tempting to regard our church gatherings as the point at which we are most fully church and the place where ministry and mission take place. During lockdown our digital 'gatherings' have powerfully reminded us that we are church when we are scattered around towns and cities just as much as when we are in the same building. Beyond lockdown, we have an opportunity to place a new focus of testimony and prayer on the ways God is at work in us, through us and around us in our scattered callings, as well as developing fruitful partnerships with others serving our communities.

4. Daring to Change

For generations we have told ourselves the story that churches are very slow to change. We have considered ourselves to be inherently conservative, prone to moving at the pace of the slowest or by small incremental steps. It has turned out that this story was wrong. Within a fortnight of lockdown almost all our churches managed to re-invent our patterns of worshipping and connecting. We have been creatively developing a form of church dramatically different to what we have been comfortable with for decades (maybe even centuries).

Sure, this radical change was out of necessity, but it is time for us to think what other necessities there are that we may have been neglecting. It is surely *necessary* that 'by all possible means [we] might save some' (1 Corinthians 9:22). If we take this necessity as seriously as those decreed by governments in Westminster and Holyrood, what bold innovations to our church practices and structures will this provoke? Now we have proved that our churches can change without years of deliberation and compromise, it is time to capitalise on this new discovery for the sake of the gospel.

Every year we ask Baptist churches to report the number of people they have baptised. In 2019 over 100 of our 163 churches baptised no one, and only 11 churches baptised more than 5 people. Surely this huge evangelistic under-performance provokes us to leverage our newly-discovered potential for change to rise to the challenge of making new disciples of Jesus.

5. New Role Models

Lockdown has given our society a new set of role models to celebrate. We have been applauding the NHS and celebrating the sacrificial work of people working in the virus

⁴ In his book *Incarnational Mission* (Canterbury Press, 2018) Sam Wells suggests 'being with' others is the touchstone for Christian discipleship, more than *doing to*, *doing with* or *being for* others.

danger zones, many of whom are among the most poorly paid in our society. Scientists co-operating internationally for the common good in search of a vaccine have been recognised. The service provided by workers in food stores, potentially encountering the virus from hundreds of customers each day, has been brought to the foreground.

Beyond lockdown, perhaps our churches can be distinctive as communities that continue to celebrate those who enrich our communities and show gratitude to people in services and businesses whose work adds to fullness of life. Whilst the usual celebrities will likely return to trending and occupying the headlines, we have an opportunity to let the last become first (Matthew 20.16) and pay special attention to those who may be less conspicuous yet contribute more.⁵

6. Mutual Care

The BUS survey of churches after the start of lockdown reveals a high level of mutual care taking place in our churches. Not only are ministers and pastoral teams stepping up to the challenge but a wide breadth of members are taking it on themselves to contact others in the fellowship to check on their wellbeing and offer support.

This opens up an opportunity for churches beyond lockdown to review their expectations of ongoing mutual care. Some churches feel the duty of their minister is to 'keep an eye on everyone' and to be involved in some way with anyone who expresses a personal, emotional or spiritual need. Yet it may well be that this flowering of mutual care in the present time is reminding us that God's Spirit has equipped us to watch over *one another* and that loving one another as Jesus has loved us (John 13.34) is the responsibility of all of us.

Any minister will seek to support people in times of serious need and/or ensure others are standing with them. Yet the nature of pastoral care is above all to lead God's people in the way of Jesus, guiding them into greater maturity and leading them in mission. It is far more than keeping an eye on the general well-being of everyone.

Beyond lockdown there is an opportunity for churches and ministers to reconsider what the pastoral role of the minister is and how this relates to the mutual care of the whole church for one another. For some congregations there is a mis-match of expectations and this leads to unhelpful tension. For some ministers the expectations of the church feel like a heavy burden that inhibits them from fulfilling their calling to lead the church in mission and equip all God's people for works of service (Ephesians 4.12). The positive experiences of mutually participating in care during lockdown offer a starting point for churches and ministers to recalibrate the minister's leadership in care and in mission. Such conversations will surely enable the church to focus its best resources on both loving care and bold mission in the days ahead. They might open up new possibilities for ministers to focus on the fundamental task of disciple-making.

⁵ Krish Kandiah has suggested that post lockdown will be a time for 'rebooting our heroes'.
<https://outreachmagazine.com/interviews/55295-the-agile-church.html>

Planning for the Post-Lockdown Future

At the time of writing it is not at all clear how long churches will remain under lockdown, nor what the gradual easing of lockdown might look like in coming months. We could wait until the end of lockdown before we consider the possibilities I've outlined above (and the many more ideas that you have probably thought of as you've been reading this). However, it seems to me that now is the time to start planning for the post-lockdown future. Many people have observed that it will be easy (too easy?) to go back to 'business as usual' and simply revert to doing exactly what we did before the Coronavirus crisis. I'm not even sure if that would be easy, but I'm certain it would be disappointing. Out of the loss, pain, disruption and uncertainty of this season, God is offering us a gift of renewal. It is a gift to be received with gratitude.

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