

## *Church Life During the Crisis*

What effect has the lockdown and, more precisely, the churches' response to it, had on normal church life? Make no mistake, it has affected it. Church life is very different during the lockdown. Or is it? In externals, yes, but in essence?

I want to concentrate on two effects the lockdown has had on church life – positive and negative.

### ***The positive effect***

During the lockdown, some churches have used the internet to set up small groups which allow and nurture intensive interaction between participants who are specially invited to tune in. This has been a positive move, making *ekklēsia* life more prominent in two respects: it has emphasised its exclusivity, and led to a greater amount of mutual interaction between the believers. Since this is precisely what believers experienced and were taught to value in the *ekklēsia* in the days of the New Testament, I see this reaction to the crisis as a very healthy sign, and it is to be hoped the reality continues when things get back to normal.

### ***The negative effect***

There are three aspects to the negative effect.

*First*, while the proliferation of livestreaming during the crisis has not produced what was regarded as normal church life before the crisis, it has certainly shone a spotlight on it, exposing for all to see (literally!) Christendom's domination of church life for the majority. It highlights that churches feel the necessity to maintain their age-old practice and satisfy the need of believers, the vast majority of whom want to 'attend a church service' in a 'place of worship' or 'a house of God', during a 'time of worship'. This practice seems to be a lifeline without which many believers feel utterly bereft of the basic necessities for spiritual life, a prop

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they cannot do without. While the privations of the Second World War showed that people could be self-reliant, improvise, make do and mend,<sup>1</sup> the typical church reaction to the present crisis has drawn attention to the dependency of many on ‘the pastor’ and his ministry, giving the impression that not a few believers find it hard to cope without such provision. The decades of Christendom church-life they have enjoyed do not seem to have fitted them well for the privations of lockdown – which failure the burgeoning internet activity has shown only too clearly. Most believers seem to need more props than ever!

*Second*, the popularity of the livestreaming has exposed the common conviction that ‘a church service’ is the ideal venue for reaching ‘the unchurched’. Not only that, but the proliferation of internet activity makes the inclusive nature of the contemporary church crystal clear, since all and sundry can watch ‘the service’. Indeed, attracting viewers (especially those without church connection) is almost certainly one of the main purposes of internet use for most churches.<sup>2</sup>

*Third*, livestreaming not only *exposes* Christendom’s grip on the *ekklēsia*; it *strengthens* it. Believers, in large measure, are now, even more blatantly than before, literally watching a performance. And this, in turn, is almost bound to produce an even greater dependency most believers have on their ‘ministers’ for spiritual sustenance. Furthermore, it has given added weight to the growing inclusivism of the churches, as all and sundry can be part of it.

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, in the UK although the war diet was sparser, it was healthier, and there was less depression in general.

<sup>2</sup> The following appears under ‘Sermon’ in *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*: ‘Mark Chaves, Professor of Sociology, Religion and Divinity at Duke University, reckons that multi-site churches, which have pioneered the use of video sermons broadcast in different church buildings, will also lose fewer members – and their cash (Mark Chaves: “Sunday slump: The virus is accelerating de-churching in America”, *The Economist*, 23rd May 2020)’.

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Two words capture what I am trying to say: the reaction to the lockdown has *exposed* – and *enforced* – the average believer’s reliance on ‘a church service’ for spiritual sustenance. In other words, churches have responded to the lockdown by increasing dependence on that which has signally failed in the past – a downward spiral if ever there was one.

Will we face up to these negative effects? Has the virus with the resultant lockdown been God’s wake-up call to us? If so, will we heed it? Will we – like Judah of old (see Ezra and Nehemiah) – repent and reform? Will we recover new-covenant *ekklēsia* life?

That is what I want to think about in the next chapter.