



How Should We Be and Do Church after COVID? Food for Thought for MCM Church Leaders and Congregations

Being church in the midst of a pandemic has been challenging, but what happens after COVID? Do we return to the way things were pre-pandemic, or are there opportunities to change how we are the church and how we “do church”? What have we learned about doing the ministries of the church from our COVID experience?

There is no question that the COVID-19 pandemic has changed many things in our lives, including church. Beyond the most devastating tolls in lives lost and on physical and mental health, there have been significant economic, educational, and social tolls as well.

Churches have not come through all this unscathed, of course. Some churches have closed. Many pastors have experienced COVID burnout. And every church has had to reconfigure how they “do church” in order to continue their ministries during pandemic restrictions.

It has been said that the COVID-19 pandemic has been a revelatory experience for us as a society. It has shown the value of both scientific research and cultural awareness. It has highlighted who the truly essential workers are. It has exposed the growing disparity between the “haves” and the “have-nots,” with COVID effects disproportionately touching the working poor and disempowered minorities.

The pandemic has also been a revelatory experience for the church. In some cases it has revealed where we have weaknesses in our theological understanding of the church and its mission and in the practical outworking of this theology in our church programs. At the same time it has shown where our strengths lie: in our grounding in the words and ways of Jesus, in our relationships within community, and in the creativity and resiliency of the people, both leader and lay, who make up our congregations.

I offer the following as food for thought for us as Mennonite Church Manitoba. I invite congregations, lay leaders, and pastors to use this as a resource for reflecting on these questions. What have we learned about church during COVID: about being the church, about doing the ministries of the church? What needs to change in how we are the church, in how we “do church,” after COVID? What needs to return to the way things were?

May God bless us with wisdom, courage, and grace as we navigate the uncharted post-pandemic waters ahead. And may we be encouraged that we do so together as a regional church, as part of a nation-wide church, and always within the guiding presence of Christ.

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Being Church

As Mennonites we have often emphasized “doing church” over “being church.” But what we do as churches flows out of who we are as churches. Whether we are conscious of it or not, how we function as churches depends on what we understand “church” to be. Specific programs will come and go, even specific manifestations of church will fade away (no one imagines “Mennonite Church Manitoba” will be around forever, do they?), but the Church will remain.

I have found it helpful to think about “the church”—both local congregations and larger bodies—in terms of a Trinity of metaphors drawn from the New Testament: the church as the family of God, as the Body of Christ, and as a temple of the Holy Spirit. There are certainly other ways to think theologically about the church. Feel free to brainstorm around this.

The Church as the Family of God

One of the primary metaphors used in the New Testament to describe the church is “the church as God’s family.” There is, of course, a sense in which all humanity is God’s family—we are all God’s offspring, as Paul puts it in Acts 17, quoting a Greek poet—but there is a distinct sense in which “all who follow Jesus, all around the world” are called the family of God, and we are each children of God, sisters, brothers, siblings in Christ, born of the Spirit.

Some of us have negative associations with family. For most of us, family is complicated. Yet in its healthiest manifestations, a family is a place of security, acceptance, and belonging. A healthy family shapes a healthy self-identity and healthy ways of relating to others. A healthy family shares a bond that is only strengthened through the diversity of its members and the challenges they face together. A healthy family honours its elders, pays special attention to its children, and cares for each other through thick and thin. A healthy family both mourns and celebrates together.

Prompting questions: How has your congregation historically shown itself to be a “family of God”? How has your congregation shown itself to be “the family of God” during the pandemic? What has been lost, or have you missed the most, about your church as “God’s family” during the past months? How can your congregation intentionally strength its bond as a “family of God” in the coming months, coming out of the pandemic?

The Church as the Body of Christ

Another prominent metaphor for the church in the New Testament is the Apostle Paul’s image of “the church as Christ’s body.” This language is used both for the local congregation, Christ-followers who gather together regularly in a specific location, and for larger expressions of the church: regional, or even global.

The image of the body highlights the unity in diversity of the church: like a single body with its many parts, we who are diverse in knowledge and skills, even personality and theology, are unified in Christ by the Spirit. Because of this, Paul insists, we ought to care for one another, especially for those who are most vulnerable among us, because the suffering of one part of the body is felt throughout the body. Also, we ought to build up one another, encouraging and supporting one another, knowing that

in doing so we are strengthening the whole body. As “the body of Christ,” we are led by Jesus our head, and we draw our strength from him. As “the body of Christ,” we continue the ministry of Jesus in the world.

Prompting questions: How has your congregation historically shown itself to be a “body”? the “body of Christ”? What about being “Christ’s body” has been neglected within your church during the past months? How has your congregation shown itself to be “the body of Christ” during the pandemic? How has it perhaps shown itself to be “Christ’s body” in new and unexpected ways?

The Church as a Temple of the Spirit

A third significant metaphor for the church in the New Testament is “the church as a temple of the Holy Spirit.” This language and imagery comes out in various ways throughout the New Testament.

As a “temple of the Spirit,” the assembly of Christ-followers is where heaven and earth meet; this gathering of believers in Jesus is where the divine and human intersect. This is not to say that the church is the only place where this happens, but it is one important place. God’s loving presence is mediated to the world through the local Christian community; the world’s suffering and sin is mediated to God through the church. As the church gathers, it represents all creation in its worship of God; as it scatters, it represents God to all of creation. This “temple of the Spirit” is not a physical building; it is made of “living stones,” built of human persons in all our diversity and frailty to become something stronger and more majestic than we could ever be on our own.

Prompting questions: How has your congregation historically shown itself to be a “temple of the Holy Spirit”? How has your congregation shown itself to be “the Spirit’s temple” during the pandemic? What has been lost, or have you missed the most, about your church as “a temple of the Spirit” during the past months? What opportunities are there going forward for your congregation to be renewed as “a temple of the Holy Spirit”?

Doing Church

Worship Services

This is undoubtedly the most public way churches have changed during COVID. Most of our worship services over the past many months have been online in some way. Churches that never imagined they would have an “online presence” have had to develop one. Even when we have been able to worship in person, this has not been the same. We have had to develop protocols for gathering that would have been unthinkable two years ago. Underlying many of these changes has been an anxious question: will people “come back to church” after COVID, by which we mean, will people come back to our regular worship services?

We’ll reflect on some of the specific elements of our worship services in what follows: music, preaching, giving, technology, and so on. For now, though, I invite you to reflect on larger questions, questions like: *What is “worship”? What do we imagine we are doing when we gather together to “worship”? What exactly is happening in ourselves individually, among us collectively? What is being “accomplished”? Why do we worship together? Why is collective, communal worship important?*

Biblically and historically, there have been a variety of answers to these questions. Generally, corporate worship has been viewed as having both “vertical” and “horizontal” dimensions. Vertically, we connect with God in our worship: hearing from God, responding to God, praying and confessing to God, thanking and praising God our Creator and Redeemer. Horizontally, we connect with each other in our worship: hearing from each other, responding to each other, learning together and encouraging each other in our faith and life.

Once you have reflected on these larger questions, I invite you to reflect on your congregation’s worship during COVID.

Prompting questions: As your church made decisions regarding the “how” of worship services during COVID, to what extent were these decisions also guided by the “what” and “why” of worship (as above)? How has your congregation seen these larger purposes of communal worship enhanced because of changes in how you worshiped together? How has your congregation seen these purposes diminished? How might your understanding and practice of collective worship change because of these COVID experiences of worship?

If your church has gone to livestreamed or recorded online services, is this a dimension of your collective worship you plan to continue? Why or why not? Will hybrid worship services (not merely having both online and in-person options, but integrating these together) be something you will consider? How will you do this so the experience is meaningful for both those in person and those online?

Will your church’s experience during COVID change how you think about the centrality of worship services in the life of your congregation? Will it change how you think about who is part of your church, given that not everyone who participates in your congregation shows up in person for a worship service?

Music Ministry

Congregational music has changed significantly during the pandemic. Choirs have not been functioning, or they have gone virtual, recording individually and bringing the choir together through video editing. Musicians have been pre-recording audio or video at home or in small groups at church. Livestreamed music has been scaled back to a few musicians at a time. Congregational singing—when we’ve been able to gather in person—has been reduced or eliminated. And, of course, Zoom singing has been an adventure!

Prompting questions: What have you learned through COVID about the importance and value of music in the life of your congregation? Are there dimensions of church music you have most missed as a congregation during COVID and want to ensure get “reborn”? Are there dimensions you haven’t missed, that may be laid aside going forward?

Have you found that your church values “high quality music,” or “congregational participation regardless of quality,” or a mix of both? Have you discovered musical gifts and abilities among you that were previously unknown? Have you tried new non-vocal engagement with music during COVID

(e.g. clapping, motions, prompted reflections on lyrics) which you might wish to continue going forward?

Preaching

Our pastors and lay preachers have learned that it is very different speaking to a camera or microphone than speaking to a gathered congregation! Many have had to develop new skills in audio and video recording and editing, alongside simply getting used to speaking to an empty room. Some have discovered that shorter sermons may be more effective online, and wonder if the same is true in person. Some congregations have included a time of Zoom discussion around the sermon in their worship services, introducing a new dimension to the preaching ministry of the church. Others have tried different preaching formats, or sometimes even gone without a sermon altogether.

Prompting questions: For preachers, how have you had to adapt your preaching during the pandemic? What have you learned from this experience that you'll want to carry into your future preaching?

For congregations and church leaders, has COVID worship changed how you think about the sermon's role within your communal worship? If so, how might this changed perception be incorporated into your worship services going forward? Are there new things you might be willing to try, such as incorporating a time for discussion around the sermon, doing more interactive sermons, doing multi-part sermons, and so on?

Communion and Baptism

These rituals have special significance for Mennonites, and so these are rituals which have always had a tendency to become very “ritualized” among us, with strong traditions in our congregations as to how communion or baptism is supposed to be done. However, COVID has forced us out of our traditional ways of doing these things.

Most congregations have practiced “self-administering” communion in some way, with each household preparing their own communion elements and sharing among themselves, guided by a Zoom or live-streamed leader or following a pre-recorded service. The elements have often been simply whatever people have at home. As for baptisms, many congregations have simply not done baptisms during the pandemic. Some have done individual baptismal services with a small group of family when COVID restrictions have allowed.

Prompting questions: Has your congregation baptized anyone during the pandemic, and if so, how was that done? How did your congregation practice communion during COVID? What has been lost in these practices of baptism and communion? What, if anything, has been gained? Might this experience prompt your congregation to try new ways of doing these ancient rituals? Might it prompt new ways of understanding these ancient rituals?

Christian Education/Spiritual Formation

Sunday schools, children's groups, youth groups, adult education, Bible studies, prayer meetings, baptismal classes, and more, have had to adapt during the pandemic. Some churches have not been able to have these programs during COVID lockdowns. Others have used Zoom, or created video

content, or passed around YouTube links, or otherwise taken advantage of online media to continue at least some Christian education programming.

Prompting questions: How has your congregation done (or not done) Christian education during COVID? What long-term impact do you think this COVID era might have on the spiritual formation of different age groups within your church? What lack might need to be addressed in your congregation coming out of COVID? If you have used online media for Christian education/spiritual formation during the pandemic, how has that gone well? How has it not gone well? What should carry on in your Christian education/spiritual formation programming in the future, and what should be left behind?

Fellowship

For many congregations simply “being together” before or after worship services, or through small groups, potlucks, and more, is an important part of church life. Doing this in person has been nearly impossible for most churches through most of the pandemic. Some churches have found a measure of fellowship through Zoom or in occasional outdoor events.

Prompting questions: If your congregation has “fellowshipped” via Zoom during COVID, what have been some unexpected benefits of this? For instance, have you seen people participate who might not otherwise have done so or been able to do so? How might you be able to carry on those benefits going forward?

Congregational Care

Congregational caregivers, whether pastors or lay people, have had to adapt significantly during the pandemic. For many, this has meant more and longer phone calls rather than in-person visits. Some have incorporated Zoom or other video calling into their visitation. Many congregations have had to rely on local chaplains for in-person spiritual care for church members in care homes or hospitals. Funerals have been postponed or significantly scaled back to fit within public health restrictions.

Congregational care needs have also shifted. Mental health concerns such as loneliness, anxiety, and depression have increased, especially among the elderly or those living alone. Dysfunctional family dynamics, even domestic abuse, have made homes even scarier places for some people during COVID lockdowns. There has been a general layer of fatigue and anxiety over all of us during these months. Congregational caregivers, including pastors, deacons, and others, have not been immune from these COVID effects themselves.

Prompting questions: Is there caregiving knowledge or skills that your congregational caregivers have learned during COVID that should continue to be used in the future? Were there organizational changes made for caregiving during COVID that could be useful going forward? How has the pandemic created stress upon your congregational caregivers or caregiving system, and what can you learn from that about support for your caregivers and your church’s system of caregiving?

Local Mission and Presence

Churches have not been able to be present in their communities in the same way as they were before COVID, and this has affected local mission initiatives. Many such programs have had to be put on

pause; some may never be revived. In some cases, though, churches have discovered new opportunities for local outreach. Some have developed online ministries of witness, prayer, material aid, and more within their community. Others have partnered with community organizations in new uses of church space and opportunities for church volunteers.

Prompting questions: Did your church have to stop any community ministries during COVID? If so, which of these can be revived in the future? How might they change going forward? Did your church discover any new ways to reach out into your community? Should those continue post-pandemic, and if so, how?

Regional, National, and International Connection and Mission

When the pandemic first hit, most churches were simply trying to keep their heads above water. It was hard to see beyond our own congregation, even beyond the next Sunday service. Mennonite Church Manitoba and Canada offered support to congregations and this was gratefully received, but beyond this there was little connection with the wider church and its mission.

This has changed as we have settled into pandemic realities, and there has been more energy for connecting to the work of the regional, national, and international church. Nevertheless, the work of the wider church has continued, adapting through COVID in many of the same ways local churches have had to adapt. MCM, MC Canada, our shared International Witness program, even the work of Mennonite World Conference—much of this collective church mission has focused on supporting local congregations and ministries through COVID, whether in Gretna, Manitoba, or in Chuncheon, South Korea.

Prompting questions: Has your congregation been able to maintain meaningful connections during COVID with wider church bodies such as Mennonite Church Manitoba, Mennonite Church Canada, International Witness, or Mennonite World Conference? If so, who or what has helped that connection be maintained? If not, how might your congregation and the wider church work to strengthen those connections going forward? Has your congregation developed new or more meaningful connections with the wider church during COVID? If so, how might those connections be deepened going forward?

Financial Giving

Many of our MCM churches have reported little effect on financial giving to the church during COVID. Some, however, have been hit hard, as their people have been part of those demographic or economic sectors most affected by COVID restrictions. Most churches have had to shift to alternatives to Sunday morning offering: online giving through the church website, bank bill payment, e-transfers, cheques by mail, and even treasurers picking up cheques from congregation member homes. For various reasons, some churches have not made this shift as well as others.

Prompting questions: How has your congregation seen changes in member giving patterns during COVID? How has your church provided alternative ways for members to give financially? What do you anticipate will be the giving patterns and the use of these alternate ways of giving post-pandemic? If your congregation has maintained or increased its internal giving during COVID, would you

consider giving more to MCM for our shared ministries, in order to make up for and even potentially assist those congregations that have been hit hardest?

Leadership Development and Pastoral Support

While COVID has been hard for everyone, pastors have had unique challenges because of their unique role. Pastors depend on their ability to connect with people, especially in person. Most pastoral roles include a strong focus on worship planning and participation. Most pastoral roles include a significant dimension of congregational care.

As we have seen, all of these areas have been made very difficult because of the pandemic. In addition, some pastors have had to add new “hats” to their wardrobe: public health interpreter, audio engineer, video editor, Zoom technician, and more. These realities have highlighted the need both for good lay leadership within our congregations to share the leadership burden, and for solid support and care for pastors.

Prompting questions: How is your pastor doing at this point in the pandemic, physically, mentally, spiritually? How has COVID highlighted the need in your congregation for diverse lay leadership? for good pastoral support? What can your church do going forward to recruit and equip lay leaders in different areas of church ministry? to ensure your pastor has the support they need to fulfill their calling with strength and joy?

Recruiting Volunteers

In most churches programs have been scaled back during COVID, which means fewer volunteers have been needed. However, required changes to worship services, online presence, local ministries, and more have in many churches meant new volunteers have needed to step in to make those changes possible. (In some cases that’s all been piled on a pastor—see above!) These mixed realities make recruiting volunteers post-COVID a potentially challenging task.

Prompting questions: Have some of your volunteers been diverted into COVID-era ministries (e.g. livestreaming tech support)? If so, will these ministries continue post-COVID, and will this mean you need to find other volunteers for what they used to do? Do you anticipate being able to recruit all the volunteers you need for new or revived programs post-pandemic? If not, do you have a plan for how to re-engage your volunteers, or even to increase your volunteer base? Or do you have a plan for decreasing programming to fit your volunteer base?

Conducting Meetings

Most churches have had to enter the world of Zoom, if not for worship services or Bible studies, at least for committee meetings. In some ways this has been a blessing: there is no commute required, and meetings may (note: “may”!) be more efficient. However, this has not always been a blessing: nuance in communication can easily be missed over Zoom, the informal things that build trust are largely absent (e.g. chit-chat before or after meetings), and the larger the meeting the more these challenges are felt.

Prompting questions: If your congregation used Zoom or another online platform for meetings, what benefits did you notice from doing meetings this way? What was detrimental about doing meetings this way? How might your church carry forward the good things about Zoom meetings—maybe even keeping a Zoom option for meetings—into the future?

Online Presence

Many churches did not think much about an “online presence” prior to COVID. It was enough to have a website or perhaps a Facebook page, just so someone who wanted basic information about the church could find it online. Most of our congregations within MCM now have a significant online presence, whether that is expanding the media already in use before the pandemic or expanding the number and types of online platforms (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, website, blog, podcast).

Prompting questions: If your church has expanded its online presence during COVID, how has that been a good thing for your congregation, or for your church’s presence in the community? How has that been detrimental to your congregational life, your pastor’s/volunteers’ workload, or in other ways? How might you continue to use your online presence in positive ways going forward, or even expand it? How might you scale it back post-COVID if it is proving too cumbersome?

Technological Support

Technology has played an increasingly important role in church life and ministry for a long time, but this has expanded rapidly during COVID. Some congregations have adapted well to this change, having the financial and volunteer resources needed. Other congregations have not adapted as well because they have lacked these resources.

Prompting questions: Do you have tech-savvy volunteers within your congregation who have stepped up to help with technological changes during COVID? Do you have people within your congregation who could step up to help, but need technical training or other support? Does your church have financial resources to supply the tech needs for administrative assistants, pastors, and audio/video techs? If you lack these financial and volunteer resources, how could we as MCM congregations support you? If you have these resources, how can your church support other congregations?