

Conversations: Church in the midst of the pandemic

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The last time I made my communion was on Saturday, March 14, 2020. Prior to that day I had attended an 8:00 a.m. Eucharist at a local parish most every Sunday. On weekdays, I would regularly slip into the Cathedral chapel at noon for a quiet Mass (presiding once every four to six weeks). On March 15, Eucharistic practice would stop for the time being.

With many others from across the Canadian church, I was invited by the Faith, Worship and Ministry Committee of the Anglican Church of Canada to write a brief paper on the experience of the church in the pandemic. My inclination was to take this as an opportunity to talk to a few people about their experience of church during these strange days. I wondered what it was like to all of a sudden have churches not open for regular worship. No gathering, no Eucharist. I decided to speak with five individuals who frequently attend the same 8 o'clock service I do on Sunday mornings, a small, purposeful sample. Admittedly, I did not know them well. I am one of those who show up just before service starts and leaves as soon as possible after the dismissal. Our conversations were one-on-one interviews (by phone or Zoom) that took place mid-summer 2020. Given their gracious willingness to speak with me and in the spirit of our shared faith, I will now call them friends.

I did not ask anyone their age, though the three women and two men I spoke with spanned an age range of approximately 60 years. Life in the midst of the pandemic intensified for sure and yet the ebbs and flow of life continued: the death of a loved one, working front line in health care, raising children, worry about grandchildren, dealing with parents in crisis living hours away, adjusted plans for an autumn wedding. A little further from the personal concerns of family and friends, one friend, when asked about feeling closer to God, marveled at the world-wide

response to the pandemic, “I am in awe how the global community; countries, political systems, peoples have realigned and reacted to combat this pandemic. I didn’t think such an effort was possible or achievable; yet it has opened. Is that being closer to God?”

Prior to the pandemic, Church attendance was a frequent part of their lives. They all named the importance of being in community with friends at Church on Sunday morning. Worship, one stated echoing the thoughts of others, “provides a base, stability in the changing world. It maintains and refreshes my moral and spiritual compass.” Another friend, the eldest in the group, put it this way, “I see the church as something important in my life and always encouraging me and pushing me to be a better person. I go practically every Sunday. But also, [our parish] has a great congregation, and the fellowship with the congregation and all the fellowship activities are very good too and it adds to your general appreciation of life to have the social atmosphere.”

Each of my new friends have attended online worship during the pandemic as frequently as they attended in person. One exclaimed, “I’ve never known a time when places of worship have been closed, that doesn’t happen ... so it was a shock.” With this initial shock would come acceptance, “it makes perfect sense [closing the church doors on Sunday morning] ... it’s not something you can lament over, it’s just what you got to do if you want to survive as a people. So, it was literally those two steps [shock and acceptance], one coming right behind the other.” While there was acknowledgment of what is missing in moving to online worship – not being together in community, not being able to enter their church, no coffee hour, no exchange of the peace, etc. - there was great appreciation for the parish’s continued ministry during the pandemic, online on Sunday morning and pastoral care throughout the week. Phone calls to check-in with other parishioners became more frequent than usual. A new Facebook group brought together some young parents. The Sunday morning online gathering was the foundation of being church in the pandemic. One of my friends said, “If it weren’t for [our parish’s online worship] I would probably try and seek something else out. So, it’s great that we have our own church, our own priest, the people that we are familiar with are on the screen, so you can feel some ... normalcy.” Another shared a similar sentiment, “It’s just that connection [which is so important], seeing the church, seeing our priest, having the homily, hearing the Word, it’s been great.” The importance of the homily was named a number of times, with one preaching moment especially important to one of my friends, “[the] homily was just perfect for me because it talked about how we are all messy, that is what it is like right now, cuz it’s been so tough, so I think

that was definitely a moment for me ... everything feels messy at the moment. I just think I felt like I could take a deep breath and I'm not the only one, it really is messy right now."

Conversations turned to the Eucharist and the reality of not being able to receive communion or even having it celebrated online. One of my new friends draws great meaning from the Eucharist. She said, "[the Eucharist is] very important to me and it's probably the hardest thing to have gotten used to, not being able to have communion." In short order, however, she became accustomed to not being able to receive communion and found other ways to feel a similar connection, especially listening to gospel music and relishing her household prayer.

When talking to my other four friends about missing the Eucharist, I was in for a bit of a surprise. The loss of the Eucharist was not that big of a deal, because it did not mean much to them in the first place. Comments on the Eucharist were brief and rather matter of fact. One said, "I can say the Eucharist has never really meant that much to me. I don't find it offensive or anything, I am just not that wholeheartedly into it." Another friend acknowledged that they have never really reflected on the meaning of the Eucharist, "to me growing up it was just part of the church routine ... for some people it was a big moment, but it hasn't been like that for me." A similar view was shared by another friend, "the Eucharist is more of a ritual than a deep spiritual experience." And another put it this way, "How I interact with communion is still a work in progress. I'm sure there is a much deeper meaning there that I haven't grasped ... but I haven't made the connection yet." That said, he appreciates its meaning for others, "I'm sure there are many people out there [for whom] receiving communion is probably the main point of Sunday morning worship, for me it's not." While all acknowledged the absence of communion, one friend likely summed it up for all five, "I feel like there is a little bit of something missing, but personally I don't feel shafted because I'm not getting communion." And another is even more succinct, "I mean God will be with you, communion or not."

It was a joy to talk with my five new friends. Our conversations wonderfully meandered through many other topics: the implications for faith given the difference between 1st century and 21st century cosmology; the syncretism of Christian spiritual practice and yoga; the possibility of receiving communion at home while participating in an online celebration of the Eucharist (the general consensus - that's fine, though not necessary); concerns for the parish in anticipation of the retirement of a much loved priest; remembering the words of a grandmother who counselled that in times of trouble, "put your hand up, Jesus will take your hand and walk with you."

Clearly, these conversations represent a small purposeful sample and the insights gleaned cannot be generalized in any quantifiable way. Joining these voices with many others across the church may assist in providing insight on how to move forward in exploring further questions around, for example, theological reflection, faith formation, parish programming as well as liturgical and pastoral practice. I defer to others to frame and advance such questions.

I am very grateful to the five individuals who took the time to engage in conversation with me. The quality of their insight, faith, and lived experience has given me pause for much reflection. They all expressed a yearning to get back to church as it once was. One wondered if the Eucharist might mean more when “we can get back to church and receive communion again.” That will be a fascinating conversation. I might even stick around for coffee.