

Accessibility and mystery

NICK PANG

If one were to look up when entering into St Saviour's, Penticton, one might notice a large canvas banner hanging from the rood screen which separates the narthex and the nave. The banner reads: "Welcom Home in Jesus Name". It was gifted to the parish a number of years ago by a couple of members who had spent some time working in Papua New Guinea and had forged some strong friendships with the church there. That sign serves as an icon to me of one of my most fundamental operating principles of liturgy: the constant balance of Accessibility and Mystery. On the one hand the message is clear, all who enter here are welcome into their spiritual home—the house of Jesus. On the other hand, it's clear that this is no simple, pro-forma "All are welcome" sign. There's a depth to it. It catches the eye and causes one to stop, to investigate, to go deeper. Did they really mean to spell "Welcom" that way? Where did it come from? What's its story?

Over the past five months the attempt to find the balance between accessibility and mystery in our worship has faced challenges that we had never considered. Like all churches we've struggled to find something that works for our community now, and which will continue to give life over the coming months and years. We began back in March by taking a 6-week pilgrimage around the Anglican Communion with stops in Toronto, Paris, Houston, Copenhagen, Hong Kong, and Kelowna (our own cathedral). We then moved into pre-recording services which premiere on YouTube, Sunday mornings at 10am. Our plan is to remain in that mode for the foreseeable future.

Accessibility

We made the decision to work with YouTube rather than Zoom because a survey of the parish found that while about 2/3 of parishioners had access to the internet, only 1/3 were able or willing to access Zoom or related platforms. At a very basic level, multimedia technology both enabled us

to connect with parishioners but also posed a barrier to access for a significant proportion of our existing congregation. Working with streaming services enabled a one-click option. Similarly, having a video up on YouTube makes accommodation for the variable schedules people are dealing with right now. Particularly for our working-aged parishioners, work and family schedules only allowed them to join with us in person on a roughly monthly basis. With this new platform they're able to participate in worship, with a familiar community, on a weekly basis, as long as they're willing to dedicate the time to it (the duration of the services has been shortened to accommodate the medium).

At a deeper level, access to ministries has grown significantly since we moved online. Many people who were unwilling to participate in the liturgy in front of the entire church are much more comfortable recording a reading or intercessions in a one-on-one video chat. The number of parishioners participating in these ministries has at least doubled. People are rediscovering a role in the liturgy and are engaging with scripture in ways that they haven't for a long time.

An interesting note is how the informal community leadership structures are changing, with some people thriving on online platforms who otherwise were unable to apply their leadership skills in the parish prior to this time, either because of personal discomfort or because of scheduling challenges. A good number of the spiritual formation questions I'm dealing with now are due to the fact that there's a whole new cohort of individuals who previously shied away from leadership and who are now willing to take on new roles.

By contrast, one evident and basic challenge to accessibility is of course the technological outlay and knowledge. As mentioned above, a significant proportion of our congregation is lacking basic access to the technological infrastructure required to participate meaningfully in this new style of community. We've had to work around this by creating parallel structures, monthly in-person gatherings in the style of midweek services, phone calls, physical mail outs, etc. that go alongside our main digital gathering.

At a deeper level, this barrier to access presents other challenges. Getting people who already have access to the technology connected has been a surmountable challenge, but there is certainly an age and class bias that we can't easily address. The most economically impoverished members of our community went without access to our worship for five months because they couldn't afford an internet connection, until we started a monthly in-person gathering. We are a community that has prided itself in the past on its service to and with the poor, and much of that core piece

of our identity is no longer viable for the foreseeable future, at least not in the same ways which were spiritually edifying for individual members and for the community. There are people both from the centre and from the margins who are being left out in this new system and that is a point of great concern.

Mystery

The accessibility concerns are real, and we are trying to address them. They're somewhat tempered, however, by the fact that there is a deepening of discipleship that is occurring as well. One of the first things we implemented when lockdown began was a rotating phone list. Each of the 14 some odd members of Church Council was given 8 parishioners to call each week, and each week the list rotated. In many ways the community has never been as connected. The lay leadership of the parish is coming to know the broader membership in ways that previously only the clergy got to experience. The impact of this on our worship is becoming clear as well. People's prayers are growing deeper and more specific as more news circulates around the parish. Likewise, the greater visibility of some members of the parish on our YouTube services has a similar function in building up the sense of community and solidarity. I think especially in the early days, the church became a symbol of hope to many members of the community by very visibly committing to keeping people connected.

Although our congregational worship on YouTube is non-*sacramental*, I would say that there is something *sacral* to it. It is a holy gathering borne out of necessity and out of concern for one another's safety. It's commonly recognized that those who undergo challenge and grief together form special bonds. By being intentional about stepping away from what is normative to us, and staying away until all are safe to return, the community seems to be committing itself to a sort of discipline, a prolonged Lenten fast, not simply from the Eucharist, but from the whole realm of the familiar. In the place of what's normal and familiar, they've begun to train in adaptability through their worship, and this has prepared them for their participation in the wider world.

In Eucharistic language, I think that this is a time of special intention to focus on the fundamental nature of our lives as gift. It's an offering to God of the most fundamental parts of our spiritual identities, ourselves, our souls and bodies, as well as our forms of prayer and our physical connections with our family in Christ. In return I think that we are being nourished by God's grace with renewed interest in the scriptures, with more profound habits of prayer and intercession, and with a stronger

sense of community—many of which are the very graces we ask to receive through our participation in the Eucharist itself.

I don't believe this is our 'new normal'. I don't believe that this is how our community will function from this point forward, but for now it's moving us into a new spiritual landscape, and for that I am grateful.

Some of the challenges that we face on the Mystery side of the equation have to do with helping people see and understand the transformation that's taking place. If you're not paying particular attention it's easy for a YouTube service to become another video to watch and to consume like all other digital media. We try to counteract that by having familiar touchstones from our in-person liturgy, including faces of parishioners, portions of familiar mass settings introduced into Morning Prayer, and by choosing to premiere the videos rather than just release them so that people have a set and familiar time at which the majority can gather together to watch at the same time. Nonetheless the risk of commodifying our worship services persists (though this is decidedly not unique to digital media).

Questions

Some of the unresolved questions I have looking ahead have to do with how we support people as their lives move increasingly online. If our 95-year-olds are now managing to work with Zoom, and their online persona is becoming more defined, how can we support their spiritual development there as well as in person? Also, how do we encourage meaningful spiritual *transformation* out of a potentially passive spiritual *experience*?

Personally, I'm less interested in the question of the mechanics of the sacraments (and yet I'm very grateful there are other smart people doing that important work!) and I'm more concerned with the question of the fundamental function and intention of the sacraments. Whether or not we're able to participate in the Eucharist in this time, is the miraculous grace of God transforming hearts and minds in ways that we normally experience through the Eucharist? As leaders in the church, how do we walk faithfully in line with what God is doing and commit ourselves to seeing that grace increase in a time of global trauma?

In many ways I'm not sure the most fundamental questions have changed very much in the past five months. They have a different context, but that Church's mission, and St Saviour's mission of Worshipping, Growing, and Loving in Christ is still just as applicable now as ever before.