

The Future of QB Churches after COVID-19

This paper has been written to help pastors and churches navigate the changes to church services, ministries and mission that will be required over the next few months. The pathway forward to what will become the new normal for your church is quite complicated and challenging and will vary from church to church. It should involve some review of church ministry and mission. What things do you hold on to, what do you leave behind, and what changes may need to take place for the healthy future of your church? This paper doesn't lay out the answers but provides the questions and issues you need to consider in navigating the change process well.

A. The present situation

The government's response to the COVID-19 crisis has forced many changes on churches in the QB Movement. Among these changes are:

1. The closing of all physical church services.
2. The closing of all ministries and events that involve physical proximity.
3. The closing of small groups that meet in homes.
4. Limitations on baptisms, weddings and funerals.
5. The social isolation of church members and their families.
6. The inability to provide physical pastoral care.

Interruption or Disruption?

Some churches see the limitations as an interruption, they're making do while they wait for things to "return to normal." Others see the limitations as a disruption, they're adapting and "preparing for a new normal." Let me expand on this.

Some churches have viewed these limitations as an **interruption**. They are seen as barriers to the church functioning effectively as God designed it. Some adjustments may have been made to continue to be the church and to serve the community. But these adjustments have never been viewed as substitutes for physical presence and ministry. These churches are waiting for a relaxation of the restrictions so that the church can return to effective ministry. There are a number of different factors that may lie behind this perspective on the COVID crisis:

1. It may be a theological view that God's church needs physical presence. Any other form of relationship or communication is a pale imitation and should not be encouraged (except in extreme circumstances). The result will be less mature Christians.
2. It may be that the church prizes physical community. People want to be together and don't see digital relationships as sufficient. They like to see people with needs and new people to the community.
3. It may be a lack of resources to do anything but physical presence well. Some churches may try hard, but they do physical church much better than online forms of ministry and communication. They rightly want to return to their strengths and gifts.
4. It may be a lack of skills in the congregation to adapt to other forms of ministry. In particular, older generations don't generally use technology as easily and naturally as younger generations. Physical church and ministry may be far more effective and greatly preferred in churches with older congregations.

Other churches have viewed these limitations as a **disruption**. They are seen as God-allowed restrictions that drive us to abandon some old paradigms and experiment with new strategies that will allow the church to minister more effectively in a digital culture. Questions around more extensive use of technology for communication and community have been on the periphery of many churches for years, but this disruption has forced churches to experiment in a more foundational and widespread way and many have found they can be more effective in some areas. These churches want to

Of course, most QB churches lie somewhere in between the two extremes I have painted. They see COVID-19 as an interruption and are already planning with relief to return to their normal paradigm of church. But they also see aspects of disruption in COVID-19 and will try to keep some of the new skills and strategies they have learned during this time.

The journey to their new normal will be challenging with lots of decisions. I hope this paper will help churches navigate this exciting and demanding decision-making process.

B. A few Scriptures that may inform your thinking

- Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. ²⁴And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, ²⁵not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Heb. 10:23-25
- For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. ⁴They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. ⁵But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry. 2 Tim. 4:3-5
- Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland. Isaiah 43:18-19
- And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the new wine will burst the skins; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins. Luke 5:37-38
- Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. ²⁰To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. ²¹To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. ²²To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. ²³I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings. 1 Cor 9:19-23
- Who, then, are those who fear the LORD? He will instruct them in the ways they should choose. They will spend their days in prosperity, and their descendants will inherit the land. The LORD confides in those who fear him; he makes his covenant known to them. Psalm 25:12-14
- If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. James 1:5

C. Factors to consider

1. Ecclesiology is vital

- Each church needs to decide what is foundational to being the church and not just what works.
- A big issue is what degree of physical presence is essential to Christian community?
- Some churches may see digital community as consumeristic and others may see it as a new way of building community.

2. You need to find out which aspects of ministry and mission have been effective for your church

Some possibilities may include:

- Small groups are better attended. Partly this is because people have more free time and are looking to socialise, but also because it's so much easier and time efficient to jump on a Zoom conference from home than to travel (often significant distances) to someone's house.

- More people are engaging with church services. Again, there are few conflicting priorities at the moment. But also attendance at church is so easy no matter where you are, and streamed church services have become accessible to a much wider group of people.
- With streamed services, non-Christians/seekers are finding it easier to connect with the local church.
- People are appreciating more pastoral support. More effort has been put into pastoral care and communication in many churches to make up for the lack of social contact. People are being phoned. Pastoral teams are communicating with congregants more. Small groups may be meeting more often.
- Members are being disciplined more intentionally. More focus has been placed on teaching/discipling by pastors. As well as the Sunday sermon, some pastors are providing weekly or even daily devotions and other discipling resources for members. Many families are taking the discipling of their children more seriously, especially with churches providing more resources for families.
- Congregants are benefitting from less demands and a more relaxed lifestyle. Some are investing more effort into their neighbourhood.
- While Zoom meetings are slightly less personal, when run well they may provide a great tool for discussion and decision-making that can easily be accessed by all leaders. Attendance at meetings may have increased.
- Corporate prayer has developed in some churches or groups. This is partly driven by the more obvious needs for prayer, but also by the creativity and accessibility that online prayer offers.
- Many people have transferred to giving online and giving has held up in some churches.

3. You need to find out which aspects of ministry and mission have been lacking or missed in your church

Some possibilities may include:

- Christians have become more consumeristic as church has come to them and asked less of them. Everything is now delivered conveniently to homes; service opportunities/demands have been significantly reduced; people are used to having much greater control over their time; service worship has been reduced and become more spectator oriented; and some have become used to sampling a variety of church services.
- Mission has diminished as mission programs have been mothballed.
- Discipleship has declined among those dependent on the body for support and encouragement.
- Youth and young adults have drifted away from the church with no specific programs for them.
- Without physical presence the sense of church community has diminished.
- People are more alienated from and more critical of the church leadership.
- Those without digital skills feel isolated and uninvolved.
- Older people feel that the church has focused more on the younger generations.
- Online worship has not provided the spiritual uplift that corporate worship offers and many feel spiritually dry.
- Some have missed serving and are feeling less useful and productive.

4. Return to the pre-COVID situation will to occur over an extended period.

- The number of people who can gather will gradually be increased. It may be many months before groups over 500 can assemble.
- Social distancing and hygiene is likely to be a high priority for a long time, especially the 1.5m rule and washing hands.
- Even when restrictions are eased, some people will feel uncomfortable freely socialising.
- People will have different views on physical contact post-COVID.
- Decisions about reopening church services and ministries will need to be made well ahead of time so people can adjust and plan.

5. Many events have been cancelled/postponed (both in the church and in the community).

- There will be lots of events happening within the church and community when restrictions are lifted (although this will be staged to a degree).
- People will have numerous commitments and will also want to get away for a holiday.

- There will be pressure from some people to run postponed events in the church.
- 6. Churches who have streamed services will have new people in their congregation that haven't attended their church.**
- Some may be reluctant to attend church.
 - For some, church service attendance may be impossible due to distance or circumstances.
 - Some are not even known to the church.
- 7. Pastors have different amounts of energy in reserve for the next phase.**
- Some pastors have been extending themselves to develop and maintain the new systems needed for congregations in social isolation. Some have foregone holidays. They may move into the post-COVID era already exhausted.
 - Some pastors have had their workloads reduced with the cancelling of many church programs. They have had less ministry and leadership demands and more time for family and relaxation. They may move into the post-COVID era feeling refreshed.
 - Most pastors lie somewhere in between. It is important for both churches and pastors themselves to understand the amount of energy pastors have in reserve to put into further change.
- 8. Financial resources may diminish**
- Many people have made a special effort to support the church in this difficult time. They may not be able to continue this.
 - Once the quite generous government support is wound back, some people will find themselves in difficult financial straits.
 - It's still difficult to know how churches will be affected financially during the period of recovery.

D. Questions to discuss

a. Big questions

- What is our ecclesiology? What are the essential elements for us of being God's church both together and in the community?
- What is God saying to us at this time? Where is God at work at the moment and how can we move with this?
- What has our church gained from the changes and what do we really need to keep? What are our highest priorities?
- What have we lost in the changes and what do we need to restore as quickly as possible? What are our highest priorities?
- Some in our congregation have benefitted from a more relaxed lifestyle and will be reluctant to return to more pressure and programs, and others have struggled with social isolation and will be hungering for more activity and social contact. What are our expectations of healthy lifestyles and how can we balance these needs?
- What pre-COVID programs/ministries/events would we consider not restoring? What are our lowest priorities to restart?
- What financial resources do we expect to have for the rest of the year? How do we encourage and provide for giving when people re-engage physically?
- Do we need to reallocate resources in light of any changed priorities? What budgetary changes are required to staff and resource new priorities?
- Do we need to adjust the position descriptions of our pastoral staff in light of these priorities?
- How can we ensure that our pastors have enough energy to implement further changes to advance God's church in a post-COVID era?
- Do we want to restore commitment to face-to-face meeting and ministry for people who have appreciated a more flexible involvement with church with a resultant increase in

personal/family/community time? If so, how will we do this?

- What else can we do now to prepare for our new future? What changes can be made now?

b. Specific issues

1. Streaming

- Will we continue to stream our church services in some form?
- If yes. Will we just stream our live church services, or will we design a special format? Will this change the format of our live services? What resources do we need to do this well? Will we encourage people to attend live services or will we equally support online attendance? If we develop an online congregation, what do we do to pastor and disciple this congregation?
- If no. What will we do to connect with those in our congregation who will only join or who prefer online church services?
- Will we provide any other streaming e.g. children's programs, youth programs, alpha courses, weekly devotions?

2. Zooming (or other forms of corporate video communication)

- Do we want to encourage the continued use of Zoom or wean people off it?
- Will we continue to Zoom some meetings? Which ones?
- Will we encourage our small groups to continue to use Zoom for some meetings? How often?

3. Social media/online communication

- What forms of communication do we need to maintain? How do we resource these?
- How do we phase out our present over-communication (if relevant)?
- What do we need to change in our social media strategy?
- If we are to focus more on digital communication, is our website suitable?

4. Events

- Of all the events that have been postponed, which ones will we run and when?
- What commitment to events can we expect from people who will want to go on holidays, have been used to free time, and will have many organisations expecting their commitment to events?

c. Phasing in the post-COVID changes

- We know what we are doing now and we know where we want to go, but how will we phase in the changes as restrictions are reduced?
- When will we restart ministries?
- Will we run smaller church services or wait until we can all worship together again?
- How will we support/serve those who are still concerned about and/or at risk of exposure to a new outbreak of COVID-19? What policies will we need to put in place?

E. Ideas to contemplate

Carey Nieuwhof – ministry model disruption

- "Are churches behaving like malls in the age of Amazon, just hoping for people to shop again?"
- "No-one should be able to out-relationship the local church. That now includes online."
- "From social networking, to short videos, to interactive services, to showing up every day rather than Sunday, the only limits on how the church can reach out online and do discipleship online are biblical faithfulness and human imagination."
- "If everyone you want to reach is online, why aren't you investing more, not less, in online in the future?"

- “The real innovation curve is just about to get started. When you get some time to reflect, think, respond, pray, imagine and dream, that’s when the real future will open up.”
- “The future is both physical and digital.”

Mike Frost – negative interruption

- “If you’re winning people to a ten or fifteen minute viewing of a pre-packaged worship and teaching experience, devoid of community, mission, correction, reconciliation or justice, you’re not growing the church. You’re fostering religious consumers.”
- “But my fear is that this deadly virus might cause the kind of glitch in church-business-as-usual that sets us back 25 years, competing with each other to attract the largest audience share, expecting less and less of our viewers, and mistakenly calling it “church growth.””

Jon Tyson – perhaps disruption

- “The roaring Twenties followed the Spanish Flu. Things will go back to normal. But should they? This is a time for deep examination.”
- “The Spirit will sustain what adrenaline can’t.”

Mark Sayers – spiritual disruption

- “God was already preparing a people for renewal. Personal crisis precedes renewal. Revival flows when men and women get to the end of themselves. 21st century radical individualism gives no meaning, but out of that comes prayer like never before”
- “When crisis happens most of us can feel tempted to go back to what we know... but there is a spiritual invitation to step into the cloud with God (like Moses), into the cloud, beyond the fear of your people, into the hidden place where God reveals his plans.”

David Kinnaman (Barna CEO) – healthy disruption

- “This is a great moment for the church - a good healthy disruption and we should not be too quick to get back to the normal ways of doing things. There is wisdom in taking our time and thinking things through.”
- “This is a disruption that will accelerate the church into the kind of disruptive future that was already under the surface. I hope that these changes will create the kind of ministry philosophy and model that will really work for Millennials and Gen Z. The church was waiting for disruption, the disruption that has already occurred in higher education and other sectors.”

Josh Laxton (Billy Graham Center) – part interruption with some disruption

- Recently, I read *The Spanish Flu Epidemic and its Influence on History* by Jaime Breitnauer. Towards the end of the book, Breitnauer writes, “Perhaps the most lasting legacy of Spanish flu is that it barely left a legacy at all. While it has continued to be studied and analysed in niche virology circles, the collective memory seemed to stub it out and hurry to move on.”
- Churches will adapt hybrid ministry models. Full disclosure, I love the term hybrid. With the hard pivot to online church services and small groups, churches have now overcome the hurdle of learning how to conduct ministry on a digital platform. To be clear, I’m not an advocate for replacing in-person gatherings with online church, nor am I an advocate for “online satellite” campuses. However, I am a huge proponent of leveraging tools for the sake of ministry and mission.

Some Helpful Links

- <https://smartchurchmanagement.com/reopen-church/>
- <https://www.9marks.org/article/what-should-our-church-consider-when-reopening-our-childrens-ministry/>
- <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2020/may/short-term-and-long-term-effects-of-covid-19-on-church-in-a.html/>