

“Unmasking the Post-Covid Church”

With a fresh face mask for the day hanging off the gear shift, I worked my way through morning traffic heading to St. Andrew's Hall at The University of British Columbia. The radio crackled with an interview of a CEO from a large online shopping platform. With echoes of an Old Testament prophet, he claimed that the future was forever altered now in light of the global pandemic. This marketplace prophet remarked on the increase of profits on his e-commerce platform during the pandemic and that even after a vaccine was administered people's lifestyle habits and choices would be forever altered in favour of his company's digital advantage.

It seems in every aspect of our common life together – social, political, economic, relational and emotional – Covid-19 has impacted daily living. And to that list we could also add spiritual. As we begin this new year of our Lord 2021, many church leaders are wondering, like the e-commerce CEO, what lasting change will the pandemic have on our “business” of glorifying God, making disciples and engaging in Christian witness?

This summer I taught a church planting class and invited a number of colleagues to join us via Zoom and share their own Christian start-up experiences. Some, like my colleague Andrea Perrett at St. Andrew's Hall noted how the pandemic expanded opportunities for connection, even as in person gatherings were limited. She had been hosting a Christian bread-baking circle for about a year before the pandemic. Andrea thought the ministry would go dormant, however, there were requests to hold the baking circle online. She recalled, “each of us creating in our own kitchens - and the participation is far greater than I ever expected or imagined. Rather than being a Vancouver-based community, we are now spread across the country, pausing once a month to bake together and provide meaningful spiritual support to one another.” But the lessons were not just for new witnessing communities. Another guest, my friend Rev. Albert Chu, Lead Pastor at Tapestry CRC in Richmond, British Columbia said that whether a church was 2 months or 200 years old they would have to think like a church planter coming out of the pandemic. By that Chu meant that in the future, a world beyond mask wearing and social distancing, Christians would need to engage in neighbourhood exegesis, experimentation and fresh translation of gospel and culture. In other words, there would be no simple reset to the way things were in January 2020.

So, what will that post-Covid church world look like as we wait and pray for the vaccine to arrive? I spoke with a few friends in ministry to get their sense of what the next, most faithful step might look like. Since Albert gave me the idea, I began by checking in with him on how things were looking for Tapestry moving out of the pandemic restrictions in 2021. Albert said that he can't wait to start engaging the neighbourhood again, having people over for dinner, going to coffee shops to meet others and joining clubs and activities that have all been put on hold. Albert believes he's not the only one who thinks that way about the future either. In fact, he says that if the church is to harness the pent-up demand for connection and community after the pandemic, we will have to “double down on hospitality.” While a tried-and-true Christian practice, hospitality needs to have an edge to it so that we are willing to experiment

and make room for those who are not yet in our Christian community. Love of neighbour needs to become a core part of our common life together.

While the enhanced online worshipping options will continue at Tap, Albert is far more interested in what Covid has done to their small group ministry. Traditionally, the large Sunday morning worship service was the focus and small groups were an optional extra throughout the week. During the pandemic they found, however, given some of the public health orders limiting the size of gathering, that they had to make their “small groups smaller.” They broke them down into cohorts of six and sometimes four. Throughout the pandemic this enriched and deepened the relationships between members in a way that their small group ministry had not experienced. “We had a cohort of six young guys, all on their own, who have shared meals, worshipped online together in one place and really cared for each other. Otherwise, this time would have been even more isolated and lonely for them,” reflects Albert. He’s excited about a post-pandemic church that focuses less on a program-driven mindset and looks more for what God is organically building through these smaller relational connections in the church.

Down the street from Tapestry Church is Richmond Presbyterian Church where my friend Rev. Victor Kim is the Lead Minister. Victor imagined that 2021 would feel more like a hard reset rather than a return to business as usual. The five-year plan that he and the Elders were following has now been set aside. How can you plan that far in advance when everything is changing before you? “Now it’s a complete redo. The ground has shifted. The context has changed,” Victor observed. Yes, there has been the pivot to online worship which his team at RPC has done well, including Assistant Minister Rev. Young Tae-Choi who was a film maker in South Korea and brought that skillset to bare on digital worship. “Online worship has really challenged our understanding of membership,” Victor observes, “it’s really more about discipleship when you have people joining you regularly from across the country and around the world.” But it’s more than just the switch to online worship that has Victor wondering about the future. He laughs, “Every pastor’s fear now is if people have been given a reason to stay away will they return post-pandemic?” Victor feels that the pandemic has exposed weaknesses that were already present whether that be in financial strength, commitment of church members beyond Sunday morning or the need for deeper discipleship. RPC’s motto is deep with God and wide with the world. Victor sees the need to take his congregation deeper in commitment to the Lord just as the world is stretching them wider with possibilities.

I also spoke with my friend Rev. Karen Dimock, Pastor at St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church in downtown Ottawa. Karen reflected on how the post pandemic church will have discovered something about the faithfulness of God and of the church. She said, “We will have a story to tell about how we came through this together. We will want to remember how often we talked about being all in this together (regardless of social position or where we are in the world) and drill down deep into what that means for moving forward in the world.” As she reflected on what will be asked of leaders in the church moving forward, Karen noted that they will want to be aware of, and practice, resistance to an unexamined return to how things were (since how things were was in fact a church in decline), leveraging instead the creativity and adaptability discovered during Covid. She noted, “I think I have seen spiritual growth and change during

COVID but I'm not always sure we are looking for feedback any differently or seeking to learn enough from what is going on in terms of faith development or to learn from those who first came to us online. We still look at the hits on the website, the number of views on YouTube and who is putting money in the plate as our key indicators."

As a leader Karen reflected on her own learning about showing people what is possible, "it is important to do so because otherwise we stay in the past." She rejoiced in the flexibility in this time of Covid that she hopes will continue. "I have had a lot of permission in a way with Covid," she notes, turning to an example back in June where she pivoted quickly when the opportunity came up on Trinity Sunday to share the service online with a Church of Scotland congregation where a friend ministered. Karen beamed when she recalled, "It was amazing. For the sermon we did a chat about the Scriptures for the day and how our individual congregations were doing. We prayed for each other. I didn't tell many about it before hand, just did it and people came back with... you know what else we could do...." She noted that in the pre-Covid world the congregation could not make a change that quickly, needing layers of approvals and hesitancy with breaking of custom.

Finally, I checked in with my friend Rev. Angie Song, one of the leaders of the English Ministry at Vaughn Community Church, a large Korean Presbyterian congregation north of Toronto. The English Ministry is mostly millennials and Gen Z folks, thus making the pivot to online easy, and impacting their ministry beyond simply a Sunday morning Zoom service. They moved their Alpha program online and found it was less intimidating for people to participate, giving them an easier choice to either try, stay or leave. With the very real barrier of challenging Toronto traffic removed, they found a greater participation in their discipleship and small group ministries since people were working from home. Reflecting on what the pandemic revealed, Angie noted that they relied too heavily on Sunday announcements and they have moved to a much better communications strategy engaging social media more purposefully. This has also been true of pastoral care, moving beyond Sunday morning interactions for midweek check in and prayer via Zoom. The pandemic also pushed the church further into a broader, more mutual leadership structure. Angie said, "Being apart meant we needed more hands to serve those in our church and beyond, intentionally inviting people into leadership and team ministry while discipling them." Looking ahead to a post-pandemic church, Angie acknowledged her own mixed reaction saying, "I think the slow return to church will be underwhelming for leaders who thought people would rush back to in-person church...it will be tempting to go back to what's comfortable and certain."

At the end of the day, I got back into my car and put the mask (now destined for the washing machine) back around my gear stick. I turned on the radio and this time it was the daily Covid update from our Provincial Health Officer Dr. Bonnie Henry. She was addressing a handful of churches that illegally opened their doors over the weekend to protest restrictions citing their Charter rights. "Faith is not a building," Henry said in her soft pastoral voice. "It is not about Sunday mornings; it is about every day. It's not about rights, it's about community. It's about responsibility to our fellow citizens." As I drove home and over the Lion's Gate Bridge, I

wondered what other lessons God has in store for us, revelations both within and outside the Church, for what Christian witness will look like in a post-Covid world.

Ross Lockhart is Dean of St. Andrew's Hall and Professor of Mission Studies at The Vancouver School of Theology.