

Worship under lockdown: stories from a suburban parish

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Abstract

Many Christian churches were forced to close their doors when governments imposed restrictions in response to the spread of the corona virus COVID-19. Many chose to develop or maintain a presence online. This took many forms, and some worshipping congregations used more than one. This paper is presented as a case study. It describes activities, both on- and off-line, undertaken in one suburban Anglican parish in Australia and examines them in the light of the notions of religious identity, and of Christian worship as an activity of the gathered community. It shows how the activities in the case study parish were designed and implemented so as to reinforce the idea of the church as a worshipping congregation, despite the inability to meet together physically and to emphasise the diversity of the community, to facilitate lay participation, and to maintain formal prayer and worship in the Anglican tradition.

Introduction

During the lockdown restrictions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic many churches introduced online worship, or augmented their online offerings. This paper not only describes the activities of one Australian Anglican worshipping community but also examines the efficacy of the activities in terms of their impact on two important aspects of Christian worship – the nature of religious identity and the importance of gathered, worshipping communities in the life of the Church. It seeks to contribute to the debate about the nature of online worship.

Closing the church doors

In Australia, the federal government and the governments of the various states implemented restrictions during March and April as a result of the appearance of confirmed cases of the coronavirus COVID-19. One element of these restrictions was the closure of many businesses and non-for-profit activities, limitations on human movement, and constraints on the number of people permitted at enclosed venues, including church buildings. As a consequence, many churches closed

their doors. In some Australian states the constraints on the number of people permitted at assemblies such as worship, weddings and funerals were lifted during June, but at end July return to pre-COVID forms of worship has not been possible in many places. Thus, there was a pause in face-to-face worship at most Australian churches for over three months, including Easter and Pentecost 2020.

The Anglican community at St Jude's

The case study is undertaken at St Jude's Brighton, a parish in the Anglican Diocese of Adelaide, South Australia. The description of activity in the parish is included to underpin the discussion about the nature of worship during the pandemic, as an example of an approach to worship during lockdown other than video services. It is not meant to be, and does not need to be, a complete description of activity in the parish. There has been a worshipping community at Brighton since 1853 (Andison 1985). The state of South Australia was founded in 1836 and Brighton is a seaside suburb, about 15 kilometres (10 miles) from the heart of the city of Adelaide. Although Brighton began as a distinct village, it now lies within the continuous suburban sprawl of Adelaide. Pre COVID-19 regular worship in the parish included a eucharist on Friday mornings attended by about 20, and eucharists at 8am and 9:30am on Sundays. Attendance on Sundays pre-COVID was around 100. There was music at all three services and a robed choir at the 9:30 sung eucharist on Sundays. The parish has no endowment or commercial property. An amateur theatre group has operated in association with the parish for over 60 years, there is an independently operated child care facility on church land, a play group, a community Pantry and a house let to an Anglican welfare agency and used for refugee housing. There is a residence for the parish priest about one kilometre away from the church complex. The local municipality includes a number of aged-care facilities, medical practices, and long-established facilities for the education of those with mental and hearing disabilities. Staff of the parish includes the parish priest, a student minister, music director and administrator. A number of retired Anglican clergy live nearby and have informal links with the parish. There are 22 licensed lay pastoral assistants and the rosters for those reading lessons, preparing and leading intercessions, assisting at the altar or attending to other duties associated with worship include over 40 individuals. The parish has a mission action plan with a focus on a generous and authentic welcome to all, encouragement of children and young people to grow in faith and to the sustenance and renewal of the environment.

It is a congregation used to difference, to 'embracing the diverse complexity of the living community' (Morrill 1999).¹ Although in many ways a middle-of-the-road Anglican parish, change has been the

¹ Cited in Cones (2019).

'one constant factor in the continuing life of St Jude's' (Andison 1985, 95). National Church Life Surveys have shown that the parish has been increasingly open to innovation (NCLS 2006 – 2020) and ranks highly on this attribute against national scores. Examples of innovation include the appointment to St Jude's of the first woman ordained to Anglican ministry in the diocese (it was her first posting in a parish), the appointment as rector of a priest who had only three years earlier been arrested in the 1980 Noonkanbah protests over Indigenous issues, flying the Aboriginal flag with the Australian flag and modifying the flagpole so that this could be done, having a woman as the current parish priest while her immediate predecessor was of Indigenous descent and is now the National Aboriginal Bishop. The parish has been an early adopter of the liturgical practices available in the 1975 and 1995 prayer books revisions.

Data for the case study was collected by examination of the official church register, the parish website (<http://stjudesbrighton.org.au>), various parish liturgical rosters and by participant observation. The use of multiple sources of data, multiple investigators and input from diverse informants (Eisenhardt 1989, 533) helped to minimise the risk of 'retrospective rationalization' (Claus and Tracey 2020, 979). A number of members of the congregation with both research experience and involvement in the life of the congregation during COVID-19 were invited to read the evolving manuscript to 'review the way in which we made use of' the material included in the study (Israel and Hay 2006, 145).

The nature of Christian life in a pandemic

Two concepts guide the description and analysis of the activities in the case study parish. The first is the nature of religious identity and the second the importance of gathered, worshipping communities in the life of the Church.

The term "religious identity" seeks to describe how an individual or group goes about living a religious life according to a particular religious tradition, the 'different ways of enacting one's religion' (Fuist 2016, 771). On that basis, the sixth century *Rule of Benedict* is an early example of a statement of religious identity. Some might say that specific Christian identity had begun much earlier when 'the disciples were first called Christians' in Antioch (Acts 11.26). For Christians, religious identity involves 'integrity, joy and demandingness' (Williams 2017, 2).

The concept of religious identity has received attention particularly in relation to the way in which those who are members of both a religious group and a minority group can reconcile differences in those identities especially where one group experiences discrimination (Fuist 2016, Cones, 2019). Individuals have a desire to establish for themselves a 'coherent' identity, in which the various aspects

of nationality, marital status, religious affiliation, gender, sexuality, wealth, family, and so on are brought into congruence with each other (Fuist 2016, 770).

It is as a worshipping community that the Church is sustained in its earthly existence. This has been so since earliest times (Dix 1945, 1040. Some will take this as a focus on the eucharist as the archetypical example of the Church (Robinson 1960, BEM 1982); others will place emphasis on the gathered community, gathered together in a way that allows each individual to contribute 'the gift that only they can give into the common life' (2007). These can be linked by focus on 'the gathering in God's name', as the latest revision of the Australian Anglican prayer book (1995) heads the opening section of the eucharist, for 'it is in the eucharist that the unity of God's people is fully manifested' (BEM 1982, s19), through 'the presence of Christ within the gathered assembly' (Wood 2011).

Identity and community are also linked through place, although the disruption of modern times has meant that the the 'traditional connection between religious identity and belonging to a local community' has become a tension; a tension which has perhaps led to or highlighted the need for a 'willingness to replace or modify ritual forms' (Tanner 2012, 5570. It may be that the current pandemic is an opportunity to be 'intellectually daring' (Sondereger 2019, 13) as churches seek to find a way, apart from worship in church buildings, for 'God's miraculous ways with us [to] become more evident, more astonishing'; indeed churches and congregations 'may well wonder...whether praise or worship of Almighty God could ever be carried out' (Sondereger 2019, 11, 7).

Maintaining the worshipping community

Once face-to-face services in church were no longer possible a series of online activities began, based on the (recently revamped) parish website. Principles which governed the selection and design of activity included the maintenance of participation, music, and recognisably Anglican forms and recognition of the seasonal nature of the Church year. A participatory approach was important.

This evidenced as a call to communal prayer "where-ever you are" at 9am on Friday or Sunday, and an online offering of Morning Prayer for Friday and for Sunday from A Prayer Book for Australia. Thus the pattern of regular Friday and Sunday worship was retained, with Morning Prayer the basis for the online activities. The Friday worship and Sunday worship each had their own tab on the website, updated each week. The services were led by the parish priest and with intercessions and readings by the lay people who were rostered to have done just that had there been face-to-face services. Sermons were recorded by the parish priest, student minister and two others, along with reflections from a further three ordained clergy associated in some way with the parish. Separate audio files

were available on the parish website for the office, readings, intercessions and sermon. Music for two hymns, one at the start and one at the end, was recorded by individuals or groups from within the corps of parish musicians. Online links were provided to the lyrics, thereby avoiding copyright and allowing a wide range of hymns to be included. Many folks contributed to the services as worshippers, musicians, readers, prayers, authors, artists and intercessors. Retired and working clergy, ring ins and extras took part. In total more than 30 people took part in the recorded online worship provided by the parish.

The chosen format allowed recognition of diversity. Parishioners whose participation in regular services was hindered by mobility difficulties were able to record readings and prayers for the online worship, while packs of printed worship material – reading sheets, printed copies of prayers and sermons – were sent from time to time to parishioners shown by telephone tree calls not to have internet access.² For children, Sunday school continued online when face-to-face gatherings were not possible.

The pause in face-to-face church services came during Lent and in the lead-up to Palm Sunday and Holy Week. The first online activities were the last of the Lenten studies which had been on Wednesdays in Lent. On Palm Sunday worship consisted of the call to communal prayer, the office of Morning Prayer for Palm Sunday and an invitation to place palms or other symbols on the gate or front door. In recent years on Palm Sunday the parish, along with other churches in the area, had held a Palm Sunday procession from the beach through the coffee strip along the main street (Jetty Road) leading to the church and so the idea of making a public statement of faith on that day was established in the worshipping community.

As the lockdown commenced during Lent, the planned Holy Week activities were re-envisaged on line. Prior to the lockdown parishioners had been invited to prepare items for a new set of stations, using a standard 30cm square frame and 13 new visuals were available by the time the service was finalised. The service used in recent years was rewritten³ and a form encompassing the text and visuals was put online so that they could be read at home. More people logged on to the online

² For a further discussion of the additional opportunities for participation in online worship see Karly Michelle Edgar, "Rituals and Traditions: Experiential Church in the Time of Covid-19," in Engage.Mail, 19 August. 2020: Ethos, 2020.

³ The rewritten service is based on the Liturgical resources of the Church of England; on one found among the Lent resources at <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/common-worship/churchs-year/times-and-seasons/lent>

version of The Stations of the Cross than had attended the face-to-face version in recent years (by the morning after the initial posting online, 38 distinct devices had logged on, while attendance in recent years had been around 10-15. Later the online engagement would increase to over 100.).

At Pentecost, parishioners were invited and encouraged to place something red, or other symbols of the season, on the gate, door or window. Many parishioners sent pictures of this and these were displayed on the parish website, as had been done with the Palm Sunday items. The parish had used a form of the Stations of the Resurrection (Via Lucis) service on Ascension Day with parishioners providing individual displays, made afresh each year, for a series of 12 to 14 stations. The service was rewritten to be consistent in format with the Holy Week service and these readings and prayers along with photographs of the stations from a recent year were made available online as a self-advancing audio-visual show. The Ascension page recorded over 100 views.

The parish did not resume worship in the church building until July, even though some Adelaide churches had commenced limited face-to-face worship earlier. By July it was possible for groups larger than 10 people to meet together (even if restrictions required pre-booking and socially distancing, careful recording of attendance, and regular cleaning). The parish church building, erected in the 1960s, is large and can accommodate congregations of up to 75 while observing the 4 square-metre distancing regulations.

Attendance at the face-to-face worship in July did not return to pre- COVID levels, with total attendance at the last round of Sunday services in July 2020 being about 80 per cent of that in the same (mid-winter) month the year before (80/95). An online presence has been maintained, although it is not as extensive as at the height of the restrictions – one service is provided online, based as before on Morning Prayer from APBA, including gospel reading and sermon, a printed reading sheet, audio for sermon, notices and two hymns. As the website says, it is a 'resource for all who cannot come to worship in-person, or who want to recap the highlights from worship that week'. Engagement with the Sunday Worship page on the website fell from an average of 150 per week in April and May to 45 in July and August.

Maintaining the witness of the church in the local community

The Palm Sunday and Pentecost displays by parishioners on their on the doors and gates was one demonstration of the continuing presence of the Church in the community as people witnessed to their faith from home, in the front yard and on gates, in ways that might have been imagined highly unlikely a year ago. Whilst this may have been important in maintaining a visual presence and

sustaining the identity of the Church and worshipping community it was not the only such activity during lockdown. There was a “telephone tree” to ensure that every registered member of the parish was contacted regularly. Mothers Union activity continued. The community Pantry, established early in 2020 as an activity in line with the Mission Action Plan and the focus on a generous welcome to all, continued as a place where parishioners and others in the community could place goods and those in need could collect them, without any need for personal contact. The Pantry, a bright, yellow structure, is visible and easily accessible from the main road. During the restrictions, and in the face of growing need, the Pantry continued to be filled with good things (Luke 1:53). In a further enhancement of mission and identity some other churches in the area, no longer able to operate Op Shops and the like, and some not-for-profit organisations with programs targeted at those in specific need, sought opportunities to join in the community Pantry initiative. More recently, one of the local supermarkets has begun to provide support.

As the online worship, and the website, included a section for notices it was possible to mark joyful parish occasions such as births and birthdays within the parish family and to make appeals for specific assistance. Requests were current for a week and included calls for clothing for a member of a neighbouring parish whose home was destroyed by fire and for a one-week focus on personal toiletries in the community party. Taken together, regular worship, the telephone tree and the Pantry allowed St Jude’s people to be creative and regular in public witness during isolation and in continuing support for the local community.

Discussion

Whilst the response at St Jude’s focussed on togetherness in prayer and on the maintenance of Christian identity in the community, there are other responses, not all of them mutually exclusive – ‘as there is no simple answer we must be adaptive’ (Edgar, 2020). Many individual churches introduced televised or online masses or eucharists, often at the request of worshippers (Wagner, 2020).ⁱ Another response, perhaps in the ‘intellectually daring’ category (Sondereger 2019, 13), was the proposal ‘to make all Confirmed Christians priests; [and to] affirm their homes as fragments of the divine sanctuary’ and thereby maintain the visibility of the church (Omondi, 2020).

The approach adopted at Brighton explicitly and deliberately eschewed the put-something-online-for-people-to-look-at approach and focussed on building up the worshipping community through an emphasis on prayer amongst the faithful and on activities which served to build up Christian identity both amongst believers and in the community.

Whilst the use of the service of Morning Prayer as the core of online worship was the most obvious indication of the commitment to prayer, it is also visible in the inclusion amongst the online worship materials of services for Holy Week and the Feast of the Ascension – services which encouraged prayer and personal reflection. St Jude's is not alone in this emphasis on prayer. The importance of prayer in the life of religious believers is shown in the increase in the number of internet searches for prayer which followed the international spread of the corona virus, with searches in March 2020 more than 50% higher than earlier averages (Bentzen 2020).

The commitment to identity is apparent at an individual level, at the level of the worshipping community, and in the wider community. The display of visible Christian symbols not only allowed parishioners to express their faith to each other but also showed the wider community of neighbours and passers-by that the Christian community remained active during the pandemic. It was a sign that the Church cared and was open, welcoming, even if the building was shut. One effect of the unexpected, COVID-affected times had been to 'call forward different ways of enacting one's religion...[and] provided cultural resources to participants that shaped their ability to variably perform religious identities' (Fuiet 2016 ,771). The continued operation of the community Pantry not only provided evidence in the local community of the Church as an organisation continuing to recognise and respond to the needs of the less fortunate members of the community, even when some other activities were closed because of state-imposed restrictions. It conveyed an image of a Church in action, not of a moribund organisation with many empty buildings (Farmer, 2020). Within the worshipping community the Pantry was a reminder that the church was active in the world and an opportunity to act out one's identity by contributing to it (or to identify with it by association). The pandemic situation called on the Church to respond to the new conditions and change 'not just in an external sense, but also internally' as Alexander Schmemmann wrote of the situation post-Constantine (Schmemmann 1986, 111). By joining in prayer at a set time, by seeing the symbols others had displayed, by knowing that the life of the parish continued, aware that the Pantry was there, the worshipping community was able to be and feel that it was a gathered community.

That the response was to a great extent bottom up and involved many people (notwithstanding the leadership of the parish priest and elected parish council) supported both the feeling of membership and identity – a focus on Christians in action rather than on the virus itself or on top-down responses (Kleinig, 2020). The activities were not only professional but also involved many members of the pre-COVID worshipping community. They were consistent with the plans and purpose which St Jude's had adopted. There was a gathered assembly, kept alive through a telephone tree, through worship 'apart

yet together',⁴ through continuing community service, and in this the community individuals found an identity, found that they were not ashamed to be a Christian and invited others visit the website and see what the Church in Brighton was doing.

Disruption often carries within it the potential to transform (Berger 2012, 525). Whether the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a transformation in Christian worship is yet to be seen, either in national churches or individual worshipping communities. Teresa Berger (2012) noted that more than the Liturgical Movement and the achievements of the First Wave of the Women's Movement were needed to challenge deep-seated liturgical practice in the first half of the twentieth century. The impact of Vatican II is still debated 50 years on. Perhaps it is too early to tell whether any COVID-driven changes will be persistent and deep-seated, at St Jude's, or elsewhere in the church.

In the United States the National Episcopal Historians and Archivists initiated a project in which its members would collect 'churches' COVID-19 responses and adaptations [and] describe how they're tracking and preserving them' (NEHA 2020). Whilst one aspect of this paper is to provide a sketch of some of the COVID-era activities of an Australian Anglican parish (perhaps as an input to future longitudinal research), another has been to review those activities against two criteria – the nature of religious identity and the importance of gathered, worshipping communities in the life of the Church.

Conclusion

Faced with a requirement to close the church doors and pause face-to-face worship, the Anglican parish of St Jude in the Adelaide suburb of Brighton sought ways to respond that were consistent with its agreed Mission Action Plan, with its Anglican heritage, and its commitment to the traditions of Anglican worship. The activities which it has undertaken focused on prayer and on a series of activities which reinforced the Christian identity of the community of believers who make up the parish. The resilience and history of innovation in the parish provided a foundation for this and allowed St Jude's to continue to serve the community and return to face-to-face eucharistic worship once limited assembly in church buildings was possible.

⁴ The phrase, sometimes rendered 'apart, yet together', sometimes 'together, but apart', has been widely used in relation to social distancing restrictions prompted by the pandemic. No source could be traced, apart from a 2018 Danish indie pop album *Apart. Yet. Together.* by Dylan Friesen although the phrase was in use before the album was recorded. It may be linked to the use of the term Living Apart Together, LAT, as a description in a demographic context of couples who although once married or cohabiting were now living separately.

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Acknowledgement

The authors thank the members of the Anglican parish of St Jude, Brighton, without whom there would be no case to study, and especially those who read the manuscript and commented on it.

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