THE COVID-19 CRISIS AND THE RESHAPING OF CHRISTIAN WORSHIP PART ONE: COMMUNITY LIFE

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ABSTRACT: The Covid-19 Crisis and the Reshaping of Christian Worship Part One: Community Life.

This article explores some of the effects of the COVID-19 crisis on churches, specifically taking into account the disruption of worship practices and the challenges in maintaining a sense of community. It examines the closure of physical church spaces, the shift to online platforms for worship, and the impact on community engagement. Additionally, it explores the role of technology in facilitating spiritual connections during these unprecedented times.

Keywords: *COVID-19, ecclesial crisis, community life, church attendance, spirituality in crisis.*

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended nearly every aspect of our daily lives, and its impact on religious institutions, particularly churches, has been profound. As centers of worship, community, and spiritual guidance, churches play a vital role in the lives of millions around the world. However, the pandemic has forced these sacred spaces to adapt rapidly to unprecedented challenges, with one of the most significant disruptions being the way in which worship is conducted and how the sense of community is fostered.[1]

This article, the first of three studies published in this journal, looks

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1   On the challenges posed by the pandemic, see Cristian Gagu, "The Church and Religious Life of Christians in Pandemic Times", in Ionuț Holubeanu (ed.), *Proceedings of the International Scientific Conference „History and Theology"*, Bucharest, Editura Universitară, 2021, pp. 288-317.

at the multifaceted effects of the COVID-19 crisis on churches, with a specific focus on the disruption of worship practices and the challenges in maintaining a sense of community. The closure of physical church spaces and the subsequent shift to online platforms for worship have reshaped the very essence of congregational gatherings. Moreover, the impact on community engagement, with its attendant challenges in fostering a sense of unity, has necessitated innovative solutions. In this context, technology has emerged as a crucial tool, facilitating virtual prayer meetings, study groups, online sermons, and religious education.

As we navigate through these unprecedented times, understanding the nuances of these changes is essential for comprehending the evolving role of churches in the lives of their congregants. This exploration not only sheds light on the immediate effects of the crisis but also sets the stage for contemplating the potential long-term transformations in the way churches operate and serve their communities. In examining the disruption of worship and community engagement, we unravel a compelling narrative of resilience, adaptation, and the evolving landscape of spiritual connectivity in the face of adversity.[2]

The evolution of ecclesial communities

The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered a seismic shift in the way people gather, connect, and worship. Among the profound changes witnessed, the loss of traditional church-making stands out as a poignant transformation, reshaping the very fabric of religious communities worldwide.[3] The first

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2   On church response and resilience, see Walter Brueggemann, *Virus as a Summons to Faith. Biblical Reflections in a Time of Loss, Grief, and Uncertainty*, Eugene, OR, Cascade Books, 2020; N.T. Wright, N.T., *God and the Pandemic. Christian Reflection on the Corona Virus and Its Aftermath*, Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan, 2020. See also Marcel V. Măcelaru, "Truth, Justice, Uprightness. Human Flourishing in Prophetic Perspective", in Robert Petkovšek / Bojan Žalec (eds.), *Truth and Compassion. Lessons from the Past and Premonitions of the Future*, Theologie Ost–West. Europäische Perspektiven 20, Berlin, LIT Verlag, 2017, pp. 49-56.

3   For examples pertaining to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on churches worldwide, see Gagu, "The Church and Religious Life of Christians in Pandemic Times", pp. 288-317; Cristopher Magezi and Vhumani Magezi, "Exploring the Impact of Covid-19 on Church Ministries in Africa. A Literature Analysis Focusing on South Africa", in *HTS Teologiese Studies* 78-4/2022, pp. 1-11; Annabella Osei-Tutu, Adjeiwa Akosua Affram,

casualty in the paradigm shift was the loss of the physical gathering space itself. The traditional church-making process, characterized by fellowship in spiritual sanctuaries, has been disrupted. The pandemic necessitated closures, limitations on capacity, and heightened safety protocols, rendering the once-thriving communal spaces eerily empty. The echoes of hymns, the warmth of shared prayers, and the tangible sense of togetherness have been replaced, at least temporarily, by the silence of vacant pews and the glow of screens during virtual services.

Moreover, for centuries, the church has not merely been a physical structure; it has been the heart of communal worship, a symbol of spiritual unity, and a testament to the enduring presence of faith. Nevertheless, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which triggered an unprecedented wave of government restrictions and safety measures aimed at curbing the spread of the virus, brought an abrupt suspension of in-person services, challenging the fundamental way congregations gathered for worship throughout the history of the Christian church. The stringent social distancing guidelines, while crucial for public health, forced a re-evaluation of traditional communal practices, which up until the pandemic took place within the walls of the church. With the suspension of in-person services, the immediate impact on congregational gatherings was palpable. The sense of togetherness, the communal singing, and the shared rituals that define the church experience were disrupted. This abrupt shift left congregants grappling with a void, as the familiar routine of physically coming together for worship was replaced by a collective sense of isolation and longing for the communal embrace that had characterized their spiritual journey.

Thus, the loss extends beyond the tangible elements of space; it seeps into the very essence of the congregational experience. Traditional church-making has always been intertwined with the idea of a collective spiritual journey, where individuals come together to share in rituals, sacraments, and the camaraderie of shared faith. The physical distancing measures enforced during the pandemic have disrupted these communal prac-

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Christopher Mensah-Sarbah, Vivian A. Dzokoto and Glenn Adams, "The Impact of COVID-19 and Religious Restrictions on the Well-Being of Ghanaian Christians. The Perspectives of Religious Leaders", in *Journal of Religion and Health* 60/2021, pp. 2232-2249; Lukasz Sulkowski and Grzegorz Ignatowski, "Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Organization of Religious Behaviour in Different Christian Denominations in Poland" in *Religions* 11/2020, article 54, pp. 1-15.

tices, challenging the fundamental nature of the congregational experience. Handshakes and hugs, once gestures of fellowship, are replaced by distant nods and virtual waves on screens. The loss is not just spatial; it is a loss of the intimate, shared experience that defines traditional church-making and therefore the danger of losing such values as fellowship

Given all these, the pandemic has forced a re-evaluation of the traditional aspects of church-making, ushering in a new era defined by adaptability, technology, and a reimagined sense of community.[4] Faced with the challenges posed by the closure of physical church spaces, religious institutions rapidly embraced the digital realm. Virtual worship services became the norm rather than the exception. Churches, regardless of size or denomination, navigated the uncharted waters of online platforms to ensure the continuity of spiritual practices. This swift adaptation demonstrated not only the resilience of faith but also the willingness of congregations to explore innovative ways of worship in the face of adversity. However, the shift to online platforms was not without its hurdles. Technological challenges emerged, ranging from limited accessibility to varying degrees of technological literacy among congregants. The need for inclusive and user-friendly solutions became evident. Churches responded by employing diverse strategies, leveraging online streaming services, video conferencing tools, and interactive platforms. These technological solutions not only bridged the physical gap created by the closure of church spaces but also opened new avenues for spiritual connectivity in a digital age.

Amidst the losses, this emerges as a silver lining. Churches innovated in order to navigate the challenges posed by the pandemic. Virtual services have become a lifeline, allowing congregations to gather digitally and maintain a semblance of unity. The loss of traditional church-making has spurred a creative reimagining of what it means to be a church community. Online platforms, streaming services, and virtual meetings have become the new tools for fostering spiritual connectivity. While the physical space was vacant, the virtual realm was brimming with opportunities for engagement, outreach, and connection. Thus, he loss of traditional church-making, though marked by challenges, also became a catalyst for reflection and adaptation. Congregations discovered the resilience of their faith beyond the confines of physical structures. The essence of the

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4   On this transformation, see Jerry Pillay, "COVID-19 Shows the Need to Make Church More Flexible", in *Transformation* 37-4/2020, pp. 266-275.

church[5] is proving to be more resilient than its architectural manifestation. In the face of adversity, communities rediscovered the core values of compassion, support, and shared spirituality that define their identity.

In conclusion, the loss of traditional church-making is a poignant chapter in the evolving narrative of religious communities during the pandemic. It signifies not just a physical void but a transformation in the very essence of congregational life. As churches grapple with the challenges and uncertainties, they are simultaneously forging a new path, one that embraces innovation, adaptability, and a deeper understanding of the enduring strength of faith. The echoes of hymns may linger differently in these changing spaces, but the spirit of community and shared belief endures, transcending the limitations imposed by the pandemic.

Community engagement in times of crisis

As physical church spaces closed their doors, a profound challenge emerged in the loss of face-to-face interactions within the church community. The informal conversations, shared meals, and personal connections that are integral to fostering a sense of community suddenly became scarce. The absence of these interpersonal dynamics posed a considerable challenge to maintaining the depth of relationships that traditionally characterize congregational life. Even more, the challenges extended beyond the loss of casual interactions. Congregations faced the difficulty of maintaining a sense of unity when physically dispersed and therefore the missional challenges present before have deepened.[6] The shared identity forged through regular gatherings and mutual support was strained. The sense of belonging, essential to the fabric of religious communities, faced unprecedented tests as congregants grappled with the isolation imposed by circumstances beyond their control.

The closure of physical church spaces necessitated a reimagining of communal rituals and celebrations. Traditionally communal practices, such as baptisms, weddings, and eucharistic meals, faced alterations or postponements. The reshaping of these significant events not only im-

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5   Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "Biserica lui Dumnezeu, sursa unui Râu al Vieții și al Vindecării" ("The Church of God, the source of a River of Life and Healing"), *Argeșul orthodox*, 2012, XI, nr. 564, p. 5.

6   On these see Marcel V. Măcelaru, "Witnessing Christ in Eastern Europe. An Assessment of Context", in Wonsuk Ma (ed.), *Proclaiming Christ in the Power of the Holy Spirit. In the Face of Major Challenges*, Tulsa, ORU Press, 2020, pp. 375-386.

pacted the individuals directly involved but also had wider implications for the community's shared experiences and the sense of continuity that such rituals provide. Significant church events and holidays, once marked by grand congregational celebrations, also underwent transformations. Easter, Christmas, and other religious observances had to be adapted to the virtual realm, challenging the traditional ways in which congregations came together to commemorate and rejoice. The impact of these changes rippled through the community, affecting the emotional and spiritual dimensions of congregational life.

To summarize, the changes faced by churches within the pandemic have had a profound impact on the sense of community within churches. Challenges arising from the loss of face-to-face interactions and the strain on maintaining a sense of unity among congregants are some of the major issues congregations had to face. Additionally, the closure of physical spaces altered traditional rituals and celebrations, reshaping the communal fabric of church life. These challenges, both interpersonal and communal, underscore the complexity of maintaining a vibrant sense of community amidst the unprecedented disruptions caused by the pandemic. As stated above, technology has played an immense role in achieving such a sense of community, albeit a poor one, at best. However poor, though, this evaluation of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on church life and experience ought to include a discussion of the technological aspect mentioned here – therefore, the section below.

The role of technology in maintaining a spiritual community

The closure of physical church spaces prompted a swift and innovative shift towards virtual meetings. Firstly, and probably most common were the prayer meetings. Congregations, separated physically, found solace in the virtual realm, where prayers were shared through video calls and online platforms. The adaptability of these virtual prayer sessions became a testament to the resilience of spiritual practices in the face of adversity. Beyond prayer, the typical bible-study groups, which are a cornerstone of many religious communities,[7] transitioned into virtual spaces. Congregants engaged

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7   On the improtance of the Bible for Christian identity and mission, see Marcel V. Măcelaru, "The Bible, Christian Existence and Mission", in Corneliu Constantineanu / Marcel V. Măcelaru / Anne-Marie Kool / Mihai Himcinschi (eds.), *Mission in Central and Eastern Europe. Realities, Perspectives, Trends*, Regnum Edinburgh Centenary Series 34, Oxford, Regnum, 2016, pp. 67-83.

in the study of sacred texts, theological discussions, and shared reflections through online platforms. The adaptability of virtual study groups not only sustained intellectual growth but also provided a forum for maintaining a sense of shared spiritual journey.

Within this context, it is noteworthy to consider the development of other online activities, that contributed to the raise of a new era in religious education. For example, the closure of physical church spaces prompted a surge in online sermons, making spiritual teachings more accessible than ever before. Congregants could participate in worship services and receive sermons from the safety of their homes, transcending geographical barriers. The digital dissemination of sermons demonstrated the power of technology in reaching a broader audience and ensuring the continuity of spiritual guidance.

Moreover, digital platforms became largely used for religious education. This digital integration continued after the end of the pandemic and consists of online classes, webinars, and interactive sessions. Not only that such means became the norm during the pandemic but due to the opportunities they offer for continued learning and spiritual growth, they remained in use. Thus, the digitalization of religious education[8] not only addressed the immediate challenges posed by the pandemic but also opened avenues for more inclusive and diverse forms of learning within religious communities, avenues that we can assume will be in use in the years to come and will further develop.

In summary, we note the pivotal role that technology played in maintaining spiritual connections within the context of the COVID-19 crisis.[9] The transition to virtual prayer sessions and study groups, proves the adaptability of spiritual practices that give one a sense of Christian identity.[10] Furthermore, the accessibility and reach of online sermons and the evolving landscape of religious education through digital platforms, show

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8   Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "Valences of Education", in *Proceedings of the 24th International RAIS Conference on Social Sciences and Humanities,* August 15-16, 2021, Princeton, NJ, United States of America, pp. 190-196.

9   Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "Spiritual lessons observed through the Coronavirus Crisis", in *Dialogo. Issue of Modern Man,* 2020, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 71-82.

10   On tennets of Christian identity, see Marcel V. Măcelaru, "Burdens of Identity – On Christian Existence in a Post-Christian World", in Corneliu Constantineanu / Georgeta Rață / Patricia Runcan (eds.), *Values of Christian Relationships*, Puterea de a fi altfel 3, București, Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, 2014, pp. 169-174.

how technology can be a crucial tool for sustaining and fostering spiritual connectedness during challenging times.

Conclusion

The effects of the COVID-19 crisis on churches have been profound, touching every facet of congregational life. From the abrupt closure of physical spaces to the rapid adaptation to virtual platforms, the pandemic has challenged long-standing traditions and prompted a reevaluation of the very nature of communal worship. The closure of physical church spaces, coupled with the surge in online worship, has given rise to a complex landscape where resilience, innovation, and adaptability become central themes.

As we reflect on the closure of physical church spaces, it becomes evident that the impact extends beyond the temporal inconveniences of social distancing and remote interactions. The very essence of congregational gatherings, the shared rituals, and the palpable sense of community have undergone a transformation. The abrupt suspension of in-person services has left congregations grappling with a void, a yearning for the familiar embrace of communal worship.

Simultaneously, the shift to online platforms for worship has demonstrated the resilience of faith in the face of adversity. Churches, regardless of size or denomination, have navigated uncharted waters to ensure the continuity of spiritual practices. Virtual worship services, once a novelty, have become a staple, offering congregants a lifeline to maintain a semblance of togetherness in a physically distanced world.

In the realm of technology, churches have faced challenges but have also discovered new opportunities. The digitalization of religious practices, though necessitated by external circumstances, has opened avenues for spiritual connectivity that transcend boundaries, geographical, but also social, economic and cultural. In this regard, the over-hierarchization present in some ecclesial quarters prior the pandemic was challenged by a new sense of equality.[11] Technological solutions, from online streaming services to interactive platforms, have become bridges to overcome the physical gap created by the closure of church spaces.

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11   As a biblical value, a return to equality, even partial, is seen here as a positive consequence. See on this Marcel V. Măcelaru, "Toward a Biblical Understanding of Equality", *Journal for Freedom of Conscience / Jurnalul Libertății de Conştiință* 10-2/2022, pp. 621-629.

The closure of physical church spaces is not merely a temporary disruption; it signifies a paradigm shift in how congregations experience and express their faith. As churches grapple with the challenges posed by the ongoing pandemic, they find themselves at a crossroads of tradition and innovation. The path forward involves not only adapting to the current circumstances but also reimagining the future of congregational worship in a world forever altered by the events of recent times.

In this evolving landscape, congregations are challenged to find a delicate balance between preserving the essence of their rich traditions and embracing the opportunities presented by the digital age. The closure of physical church spaces is a chapter in the ongoing narrative of resilience, adaptability, and the enduring spirit of faith. As communities navigate these uncharted waters, the lessons learned and the innovations embraced will shape the future of congregational life, ushering in a new era where the virtual and the traditional converge to create a tapestry of spiritual connectedness that transcends physical confines.

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