

Questions for a Post-Pandemic Church

First Conversation: What is Church? (6/10/2021)

Building on the book: [*We Shall Be Changed: Questions for the Post-Pandemic Church*](#), Mark Edington (Editor)

Five Conversations:

Each session will focus on one of the conversation topics covered in the book.

6/10 - First Conversation: What is Church?

6/24 - Second Conversation: What is Worship?

7/8 - Third Conversation: How do we address inequities and injustices made evident during the pandemic?

7/22 - Fourth Conversation: How do we adapt to the changing world while holding to the core values of being the church?

8/5 - Fifth Conversation: How do we move from talk to action?

Some opening premises:

“I want to take a moment to **reflect upon where we’ve been; and what we’ve learned**—and say a word or two about where we’re going, because if the last fifteen months have just been a big, inconvenient pause...if we haven’t changed in any way, **if our only aim is to GET BACK TO WHAT WAS...then we’ve missed out on the lessons of wilderness time.**” – Ben Trawick, sermon [*Before You Rush in....*](#), 6/6

“**We shall be changed.** But that is the only thing that is certain. We do not yet have answers to the question of how the church shall be changed by this pandemic year.” – Preface, ***We Shall Be Changed...***

What we’re going to explore in this group are “the questions that will **guide our efforts to follow God’s call in mission toward a more just society and a deeper sense of God’s presence in our lives.**” – Preface, ***We Shall Be Changed...***

First Conversation: What is Church? (Distancing and Deepening)

“How might we turn this time of distancing into a time of deeper spirituality – and how might we keep that deeper conversation with God in the regathered church? How might the virtual inform – or be – the actual future of the church?”

Theme: What has the pandemic experience taught us about what the church is? What is the essential part of the church? What is our core message and the values that reflect that message? How do we communicate that message to others?

Questions from the Essays:

“What is the church?”

What new skills do ‘we’ need?

How do we effectively communicate our faith?

What does the church and our pandemic experiences teach us about...

- how we communicate our faith effectively?
- how to be?
- how to think?
- community?
- sacraments?

What do we do with what we’ve experienced and learned? Do we take these advancements as opportunities and prepare for them – or maybe even capitalize on some of them?

Breakout Session 1: What questions would you add to the list?

What questions would you like to see Grace wrestle with in-depth?

Notes from the breakout groups:

From a post [*“What If They Don’t Come Back?” 4 Opportunities for Churches Post-Pandemic from Fresh Expressions:*](#)

- What do we do if people don’t come back to church once it opens?
- How do we re-present ourselves to our community?
- How can we build on what we learned?
- Instead of focusing on bringing people into the church, how can we bring church to people?
- How can we cast a new vision or recapture an old one? Pick 1-2 questions you’d like to see Grace focus on as we transition into post-pandemic times.

Recognizing that the pandemic was more than a virus and recovery is more than recovering from the impacts of the virus, how do we move beyond the pandemic zeitgeist (including racism, inequalities, and injustices) that has our culture locked up?

The emphasis of the last 15+ months has been on our virtual reach – so many people have found church in their home, have connected in their faith through technology. How do we get people out of the virtual to get back to the sacred grounds of worshipping?

How do we utilize our building in new ways and incorporate the technology?

How do we utilize our sanctuary as a blessed place in new ways?

What does ‘depth’ mean? Facilitator’s note: “Depth” in this case means doing more than a superficial pass through the question(s), spending time exploring the implications of the question(s) and considering alternatives, and bringing in more people for a wider engagement.

Before the pandemic, we were pretty good at in-person worship while those who joined online were “like flies on the wall.” Then shifted into worship in living rooms. We need to find a way to balance both at once.

As we broaden our reach both in-person and online, we need to think about broadening the number of shoulders involved in carrying on these ministries. In what ways can we get more people engaged?

When we shifted to virtual, we dropped a number of activities that were not suited to virtual venues. As we return to more in-person activities, how do we bring those back? How do we decide what to bring back and what to leave behind?

What is the new norm? How do we bring people back?

Breakout Session 2: Lessons Learned

What has the pandemic experience taught you/us about what the church is?

How can we at Grace learn from and build on these experiences as we move forward?

Notes from the breakout groups (roughly organized by topic):

General reflections on the experience:

This time helped me grow in faith, grow closer to Jesus, and led me to be baptized. It was a time to grow spiritually as a person.

Follow-up question we didn’t have time to explore: What specifically about this time apart helped you grow in faith?

During this time, Grace has continued and increased its generosity. A Circle rep reported how giving to selected charities has increased several fold. Similar references were made to Grace missions and the general budget. It was cited as all a part of “how blessed we are”.

One person described the at-home worship experience as having a bookcase of references and 4-5 Bibles (different interpretations) open at the same time to follow along with the sermons.

Others said they will be glad to be able to go back to Grace in person, where family is. They can't wait to get back to the sanctuary and be with the people we love. Some see the sanctuary as a holy place for worship.

On “What is the church?”:

Three C's – Connections; Community; Caring; but the church reaches out to people and communities beyond itself (the merely local congregation). And all of this grows – as we've found out during COVID – from a basic human “hunger” for community and connection; but (as our book suggested) this “hunger” for connection, for knowing people better, really extends (in real life) to people we already know (such as church or Facebook connections).

On church growth, extension, and the church experience:

In order to get youth (young persons) involved in the church (both as Christian believers and doers), we need to get them started having a necessary church experience at a very young age (so as to get them into the habit and understanding of what it means to be a Christian). However, one person who had grown up in a church where all of Sunday was spent in various church activities said it was a relief when joining Grace to spend less time at church on Sundays (day of rest, you know – and see “Supplemental Thoughts” below). What COVID has shown us is that we can usefully spread “church time” activities over the entire week (and make them less exhausting and more fulfilling). Under COVID, Grace has made, and had, good extra efforts with our youth population; this has been due, in large part, to the necessary requirement for using electronic technology, a technology the youth are very familiar with and comfortable using – hence, we have been “meeting them where they are.”

On live streaming and Zoom:

As much as these necessary technologies served an excellent purpose, there were times when the result was faintly reminiscent of “televangelism.” (No real point here, just an observation.). Some adjustments moving forward, as we blend “live” and “live streaming”?

More people from outside of Springfield have regularly joined the livestreams, engaged in chat conversations, and had prayer requests.

For small groups, technology has helped us connect more. For some, Zoom made it possible to attend these sessions (cuts commuting time).

Expand the diverse opportunities. A lot depends on technology; need to train more people on possibilities, find out what they're comfortable with, how we can reach them where they are. We also need to be mindful that some may not have been as engaged virtually through this time and make sure we are reaching them as well.

While we learned more about people in the congregation through online encounters, there's still more to know about where they live, what they experienced.

On church music:

The one thing that one of our group missed most during COVID was the Sunday service "group" music – not that the music offered wasn't great, it was. But the congregational collective singing and the choir anthems were missed. (The rare Zoom group sings, Men's Chorus and the Christmas "Silent Night" for example, were deeply appreciated, to say nothing of the lovely interpolated musical groups from outside.) This will be one aspect of a return to an in-church service that will be appreciated and add a significant element to worship.

On "where do we go from here? (particularly regarding our communities):

In the light of 2020 – Pandemic, Racism, and social and political divisiveness -- we need to open new doors to our community, to expand diverse opportunities (including classes), and "explode" mission activities. This should be the result of our having grown more caring during COVID and the George Floyd case because of each raising our awareness of the plight of others – especially our African American brothers and sisters (and others of color) – do we white Americans really know what persons of color feel on a daily basis? Can we ever know? (But we can act, based on the best of our understanding, despite its limits.)

Are we thinking about making physical changes to worship?

Need to look at doing different things and making some changes needs to be at least on the table. Try some hybrid approaches, test the waters to see what works.

Explore new ways to utilize our building and incorporate the technology. How do we utilize our sanctuary as a blessed place in new ways?

Need to have some kind of signage that says, "Grace is back", invite neighbors to join us.

Further Thoughts from the Group:

As we return to in-church worship and how we handle that – including focusing on and/or adding technologies such as live streaming and possible uses of Zoom – we need to consider those folks in our congregation and beyond (and it may be more than a few) who do not have, do not choose to use, or simply do not know how to use what we often consider to be such “standard” technologies of the present: computer connections (such as e-mail), YouTube, Facebook, Zoom, and the like. Embracing all the latest opportunities to communicate with our congregation (i.e., audience) by means of the latest technology, let us not forget also to consider how to connect with those technologically left behind (for whatever reason).

Supplemental Thoughts:

An article in *The Week* magazine (June 11, 2021), page 28, entitled “Starting Over: How to Preserve the Lockdown’s Slower Pace,” offers these suggestions for *not returning* to the 2019 “normal”, noting that “Before, it felt like home was a pit stop on the way to something else”:

- Ensure a more relaxed tempo of life
- Take part in *fewer* extracurricular activities
- Spend time outdoors together with family or friends
- Spend more family time together at the dining table
- Tune in to what you really care about
- Be intentional with your time
- Identify and establish boundaries to help preserve the positive aspects of your life
- Add “do-nothing time” to your schedule
- Do one thing a day that makes your life feel less “like an assembly line”
- Working with your hands offers a slower, more meditative start to your day
- Break off toxic or unproductive relationships in your life (this may be your best chance)
- Phase out or stop living out life patterns that make you unhappy