

Community in Absentia

Over the last three years I have been studying for a Doctor of Ministry in Biblical Preaching through Luther Seminary in St Paul, Minnesota. The final stage of this degree is a research thesis. My thesis title is *Reaching the Diaspora: Streamed Worship in the Lutheran Church of Australia, Building Koinonia and Ecclesia?* This research has had me reading widely and surveying the users of the streamed worship offerings provided by the Lutheran Church of Australia through Lutheran Media. Last Friday 20th March I submitted my thesis in preparation for oral defense, which was supposed to be done in person but will now take place online due to COVID-19 and travel restrictions.

I was shocked with the timing of completing my thesis and the sudden wave of churches around the world being forced to switch to streamed worship for worship to continue. Over this past weekend literally thousands of new streamed worship services have appeared. In normal times it is usually only those who are forced to be at arm's length to the physical worship space, through sickness, travel, disability or distance who access streaming. As Christians our desire is to be in attendance and to participate fully, including with Communion. My research affirmed this desire and as of this week we as churches in Australia have now been forced to close our doors to public gatherings. Pastors and church councils are rushing to find ways to maintain koinonia and ecclesia – community and the church.

I want to take this opportunity to encourage you as pastors and lay members to be gracious with one another. Use the gifts, talents and resources God has placed within your midst to the best of your ability but without judgment. A shiny livestream with all the bells and whistles might be what you can provide, but a smartphone and a means of holding it steady might be all that is required. On Sunday night I streamed live for the first time, via Facebook Live, to the Sunday Night at St John's community but from Calvary at Greensborough. It wasn't polished, but it worked. I shared a service order prior so that people could follow along and we worshiped and prayed, and it was good to be in community and worship together.

On Sunday I also video recorded our morning service at Calvary. We had 17 people there live and at the last minute I decided to record the service. I then edited it a little and sent a link to my congregation so that they could access it on my Google Drive. Simple but effective. As I received feedback on this, I was reminded of one of my findings as I researched for my thesis. One important factor for our people right now is familiarity. It is great to be able to access St Michael's, Hahndorf, Good Shepherd, Toowoomba, or any other stream, but what your people seek is familiarity, their pastor, a familiar sanctuary, they will forgive poor lighting or slightly off sound, because it is their place of worship. If you are able, do your recording or live stream from your sanctuary. It will help maintain a sense of connection and encourage them to look forward to a return to regular worship in the future. Give it a go, find adaptive ways to maintain or even build community for God's church, our church in these unprecedented times.

Grace and peace,

Tim Stringer

Pastor, Calvary Greensborough and Thomastown