

2020 A YEAR TO FORGET OR AN OPPORTUNITY TO CONNECT?

What has 2020 been like for you and the Christian community that you serve? And what might 2021 look like? These were two of the concepts explored during the 2020 LCAQD Pastor's Conference session; *2020: A Year to Forget, or an Opportunity to Connect?*

Despite what the past, present or future might look like, we can stand firm in the knowledge that by God's grace, we have all been given the strength to live in this constant state of flux, knowing that God's love for us in Christ never changes.

The following are reflections and comments gathered from the 2020 LCAQD Pastors Conference. They are shared with you with a heart and an invitation to more deeply explore how God has been present, where God has been noticed, and where God might be leading each of our communities.

A leadership tool will be emailed out to LCAQD pastors and congregation/parish chairs in the coming week that can be used to help your community reflect on 2020 and make plans for 2021.

WORSHIP

For some, the inability to worship regularly caused some regular church attenders to begin to disengage.

For some, being unable to partake in regular celebration of the Sacrament of Holy Communion caused great anxiety and sadness. For others, there was an adaptation to utilising Confession and Absolution as an expression of the Sacrament.

- *Did the impact of COVID simply speed up what was already happening?*
- *Has this become an opportunity to refocus on how we are building quality connections and warm community to make known God's love, forgiveness and grace?*

ONLINE WORSHIP AND CONNECTIONS

Numerous pastors shared the joy of greater participation in online worship services and online bible studies. Some pastors saw participation greater than their regular congregation attendance. Some spoke about the difficulty of 'getting the people back into church'. Other pastors reported their surprise as to how quickly some of their elderly were able to 'get the technology thing happening', while others reported a strong hesitancy to learn these new ways. A final group spoke about the lack of reliability or of user friendliness of technology.

- *What are the biggest risks with ongoing delivery of online worship services?*
- *What are the greatest opportunities for the delivery of online worship services, bible studies and other connections? How can we attend to these connections so that they grow deep and wide?*
- *How can we utilise the sudden upskilling in digital awareness to grow connective capacity?*

SPIRITUAL GROWTH

It was reported that in some communities there appeared to be a declining hunger for God.

- *McCrindle (and other) surveys suggest that COVID19 has increased the interest of Australians in spirituality. What might be the reason/s for this apparent discrepancy between what is being experienced in some churches, and what people are reporting through surveys?*
- *What is the invitation to speak into this spiritual anxiety?*

COMMUNITY

Most pastors reported the strong support among congregational members.

- *Does the concept of community in the Lutheran Church being a strength hold true? Or is this more of a cultural thing? What evidence exists that guests and visitors are intentionally engaged and connected with when attending a worshipping Lutheran community? What evidence is there that worshipping Lutheran communities are actively engaging with people outside their immediate circles of connection?*
- *What is the invitation to discovering new ways to connect and engage? What might an engaged person look like?*

CHANGE

One group noted "We have learnt what old things "are not" and what new things "could be" - there needs to be some honest conversations about where we have been and what it means, and where we are now and what it could mean. We also need to have an honest discernment about "change"...what things that we have learnt about our past and our present do we either Reject, Redeem or Receive as we follow God's mission into the future of His church here in Qld?"

When people feel under threat, they often respond in different ways. This has been described as the flight, fright, fight, freeze syndrome.

Change is inevitable. Yet we are not always good at receiving change. An underlying expression of the Gospel, and of the Theology of the Cross, is that God works through our brokenness. God created the world out of chaos. The resurrection is the outcome of God engaging in the chaos of death. Through dying, God makes things new.

Change can occur through either a technical response or an adaptive response. Technical change requires us to do things differently and often comes about by 'bringing in the experts to tell us what to do'. Adaptive change understands that every community is nuanced. It is driven by values and beliefs and involves a range of people growing together in discovering a new solution; a leadership tool will be emailed to pastors and congregation/parish chairpersons in the next week to assist congregations to think through implications for 2021.

- *COVID revealed some ministry areas that are no longer working. What are the core areas of ministry and mission in your Lutheran community that will best serve the mission of the Gospel?*
- *What are some of the things to which our Lutheran communities need to die?*
- *What things need to be rejected?*
- *What things can be redeemed?*
- *What thing can be received?*
- *Change is often difficult, because change is often at odds with culture. People are more open to the need for change when they understand that the cost of not changing is greater than the cost of changing. What are the costs of changing/not changing?*
- *What recent history can be celebrated that will help your community embrace future opportunities?*

ENGAGEMENT

Significant commentary occurred around engagement. Engagement is deeper than simply 'discussing the football or the weather'. Engagement is about developing deep, warm quality connections that reflect the agape community of the early church.

Conversation was also shared around

- the power of phone conversations (one pastor mentioned that he now knows more people, more deeply, than he previously had),

- the value of online meetings, bible studies and confirmation (more people were able to attend or be involved as they did not have distance to travel, or were able to monitor their children during meetings),
- and hybrid connections (the ability to meet a variety of needs yet still provide some sort of meaningful engagement).

Underlying these conversations was the principle that how we connect is vital!

One congregation saw the inability to have 'socially distant fellowship' after worship as an opportunity to build deep connections with local businesses (coffee shops) and gathered there after worship. The person who told this story shared the positive impact that action had on the relationship with the local business leader of a different faith.

- *McCrimdle research has identified that 90% of "people believe that their COVID-19 experience will cause technology and screens to become more integrated in their lives". What impact might this have on developing deep, warm, quality relationships?*
- *What processes will help those connected to congregations grow deep, warm, quality relationships?*
- *What might a deep, warm, quality connection look like?*
- *In the light of social distancing regulations, how can deep, warm, quality connections be developed and built upon, and in preparation if lockdown occurs again?*
- *What other 'new mediums' for engagement might congregations explore?*

LEADERSHIP

Leadership response to the rapid change was mixed. Some pastors shared the total delight of having capable and gifted leaders who pooled together their resources to continue the work of the church. Other pastors recognised that in some situations there was a lack of leadership within their congregations; this led to some pastors feeling that success/failure relied on them.

McCrimdle notes "for leaders, the future is not an inevitable destination, but something they are shaping and to which they will take their team." Leadership is key. As Solomon declared "Without vision, the people perish".

- *What vision does your congregation have for the ministry of the Gospel?*
- *What processes does your church leadership team use to remain focussed on this vision and purpose?*
- *Are we really waiting for a return to normal, or is God inviting us to build something different?*

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