

PETER ROENNFELDT

YOUR  
**CHURCH**  
HAS  
CHANGED

REBUILDING CHURCH AND MISSION POST-COVID-19



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# PANDEMICS CHANGE CHURCH

Pandemics change the course of history. Killing millions and devastating economies, they blight human civilisations and redefine social, political, military and religious landscapes. They radically change how people socialise, work and worship. People are blamed and stigmatised. Inequalities are exposed and exacerbated. The Athenian and Justinian plagues, the Black Death, Spanish Flu and other widespread plagues and pandemics all changed societies.

“Things are never the same after a pandemic,” says a former Defence Secretary for the United Kingdom, Dr Liam Fox, who has studied these outbreaks for a forthcoming book. His opinion: “The current outbreak will be no exception.”<sup>1</sup>

COVID-19 is continuing to change the world. The impact is so broad and all-encompassing that we struggle to grasp the implications. Tethered to past practices and traditions, but now exhausted from coping with a myriad of lockdowns, restrictions and regulations, it is difficult to hear what we are being told—that we won’t be returning to life the way it was before. What we thought was normal is now on hold.

And as our world is shaken, so is the church. Routines have been upset—even going to church has been redefined. Ministers have been forced to find new ways to minister. This pandemic has abruptly changed church.

## **Why this book?**

After weeks equipping disciple-makers and church-planters in Papua New Guinea, I returned to my home city of Melbourne, Australia, arriving six hours before the first mandatory quarantine began at midnight on Sunday, March 15, 2020. Sensing imminent restrictions on large community and church gatherings, I had prioritised teaching the New Testament concepts of church and mission in the preceding weeks—concepts which have been part of my training programs in dozens of countries in recent years.

Many leaders and people seemed aware that a watershed moment had

come. Key biblical insights resonated with them:

- The “two or three” gathered in the name of Jesus is the basic unit of church.
- Every household of believers is to be a disciple-making team in their homes and for nearby communities.
- All believers need equipping with simple, reproducible, anyone-can-do-it, no-cost ways of sharing faith, growing as disciples and being church.
- All must rethink life, faith and practice in light of the eternal gospel—Jesus’ death and resurrection, and His Spirit’s empowering and abiding presence.

Back in Australia, I spoke with numerous pastors and churches both nationally and internationally by email, phone and Zoom during that first week of lock-down. The next weekend I sat down and wrote *If Your Church Is Closed, Be the Church: A Pastor’s Guide to Growing Churches at Home*. Nathan Brown—book editor at Signs Publishing—worked tirelessly and by the next Friday, March 27, it was available as a free ebook (from [www.following-jesus.com](http://www.following-jesus.com)).

But this book is different. Months have gone by. As the pandemic worsened, most church buildings closed and churches went online with various levels of success. Some church buildings have since reopened, then some closed again. Some have again reopened, but following restrictions—with limited capacity. And where churches have opened, members have not rushed back. Church has changed. For some, it is painful to acknowledge. Others feel it is too early to make such a call, concerned that it might be unduly negative. By using a combination of online and in-person services, some feel church can continue largely unchanged. There are those who hope we will soon get back to what was before and that we just need to wait this out.

On the other hand, many members, local ministers, pastors and leaders know the reality—church has changed. Even where people have returned to their church buildings, it is clear that things are different. This book is for those who realise that church has changed.

## **Will it ever be the same again?**

Pandemics change societies—and with them, the expressions of church and

mission. There are clear indicators of a radically different future for church:

- *The economic impact.* Imposed restrictions affect Christians and their neighbours equally. Some may be in a bubble, but many businesses have collapsed, with jobs lost and livelihoods devastated. What will be the financial impact for churches? Will this result in fewer local church ministers and staff? Will church and denominational systems be forced to downsize or restructure?
- *The social impact.* Many church buildings closed, with believers scattered to their households—some to the surreal experience of going to church without going to a church. Now, with some churches opening, what functions of church are being truncated and redefined? What will be the ongoing impact? What key elements might be a feature of a reinvented future church?
- *The common good.* We are in this together—social distancing, quarantining and self-isolating—making sacrifices for the common good. There is a fresh sense of justice, with demands for an end to systemic inequalities and discrimination—and the church is being drawn by societal expectations to honour these values. In what ways will belief systems be challenged by societal changes resulting from this pandemic?

The dramatic economic, social and societal tsunami caused by COVID-19 catapulted the church into a future it should have been prepared for—but wasn't. Christians have spoken of times of trouble and the scattering of believers, but when it happened, churches scrambled to hang onto what was familiar: a weekly sermon and worship program.

But could this be a time to pause and reflect on trends already apparent before this pandemic hit, indicators signalling a very different future? In regions of the world where there has been growth, as well as where church attendance was in decline and mission impact minimal, two movements were already calling for radical change:

- *We are church.*<sup>2</sup> This is much more than a youth initiative for representation in church committees or councils—to which most of the next generation are not attracted at all—and much bigger than a catch phrase for togetherness. It is a call to return to the New Testament gospel frames of the Spirit's activity, church as the body of Christ, and an

unequivocal and intentional commitment to the biblical doctrine of the priesthood of all believers (see 1 Corinthians 12:27; 1 Peter 2:9, 10).

- *Missional living*. This also embodies the biblical idea that mission is the task of all believers, not only professionals, and founded in the eternal values of Jesus' life: being apostolic (sent), incarnational (one with us) and messianic (Spirit-anointed).

Being missional calls for the church to reprioritise God's mission, not calling people to come to church programs but taking the gospel and church to where they live, work and play.

Both of these—"we are church" and missional living—have been urgent grassroots calls for some decades. They define a new vision, calling for radical structural change consistent with the gospel being for all. They proactively affirm the equality of all believers with no discrimination and focus on God's mission rather than ours.

## **A wake-up call**

During July, 2020—about six months into this pandemic—social researcher Mark McCrindle surveyed 1002 Australians and "found more than a third (35 per cent) said they were praying more and 41 per cent were thinking about God more. A quarter said they were reading the Bible more."<sup>3</sup>

While some fretted when their local church worship and buildings closed, with many rushing to Zoom, in her August 23 article in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Anna Patty reported that some families were now reading their Bibles during family meals and praying at home.

"It reminded us our faith is also our responsibility and not just the responsibility of the minister in our church. . . . We needed to be proactive in talking to God," said Katie Stringer, a teacher and mother of three children aged from 6 to 13.<sup>4</sup>

McCrindle found that almost a half of those surveyed are now thinking "more about their mortality and the meaning of life."

"The research is showing that this COVID situation has rattled Australians and got them thinking about the big purpose of life," he says. "It's got them re-prioritising their life."<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, governments have ignored calls for equity and justice for all

until COVID-19 again exposed fault-lines in social and authority systems. COVID-19 has been a wake-up call to systemic inequities and injustices. And in the midst of all the challenges, we must not miss this wake-up call for the church.

When church buildings closed and members were scattered by COVID-19, fault-lines in the church were also exposed. The church is the people in homes—old, young, single, families, couples and extended families. If we do not intentionally foster this basic unit of church and prioritise God's mission, rather than maintaining structures and systems, the church as we know it will continue to haemorrhage its lifeblood. The continuing disconnection and drift of the next generations, as well as the disinterest of those of no faith and other faiths, is a wake-up call the church cannot afford to miss.

## **But the church will not disappear**

This is the twist: the church will change—but not disappear. Jesus said, “I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it” (Matthew 16:18). So it is not going away. However, the church as we have known it for centuries is disappearing—or, some might say, it has already!

If the societal shifts we are experiencing are here to stay—in our economies, social order and shared values, as well as redefining church—it is important we give attention to what post-COVID-19 church and mission might look like. The calls for the church to be a movement of the people and to be missional cannot be ignored.

This pandemic has revealed that church is not controlled by denominational committees at state, national or global levels. Amid the lockdowns, believers took church home. And even local ministers realised that they were no longer in control.

What has surprised us is how everything changed so quickly. Church buildings were closed. Families went home and Zoom and online seemed a great idea—they could tune in or not but still be the church. But many soon grew weary of that and the most socially connected weren't connecting.

Church has gone borderless, almost glocal—being globally and locally interconnected. Next generations are creating new frames. It suggests a

hybrid future encompassing in-person worship gatherings in homes and church buildings, with some online and digital choices. This will call for huge adjustments by hierarchical structures. If they don't become movement systems, they may find themselves parked like A380 aircraft in the desert—with bosses perhaps still holding their jobs but most people travelling in other ways. Church has changed. It will not disappear, but it might come back more like Jesus intended and the apostles experienced.

## Where do we go in this book?

The landscape has changed. The church has gone home. COVID-19 has exposed the reality that church and mission happens in *households*. Households of various shapes and sizes are the main agents for church and mission. Therefore, in this book, we start from this frame.

We are compelled to rethink: what is church? Because both house and church have been redefined—and because much small-group and house-church literature seems to cultivate inward and insular models—I do not refer to house-churches but *households of faith*. Church is not about me, the individual, nor about the size of our churches. Rather, the basic unit of church is the “two or three” gathered in the name of Jesus (see Matthew 18:15–20). This can no longer be ignored by community churches or denominations.

The church is much smaller than most imagined only months ago, and it is from this perspective that we start rethinking church.

At each step in this reflection, you will find practical insights, with resources for disciple-making and movement-building.

It seems to me that we are in for some huge changes, perhaps greater than witnessed previously in the Christian era. It is a painful, anxious and stressful time for all in our communities, as well as for each of us and for church—a time of major transition and restructuring. But it is also the Holy Spirit's time, during which “the Good News about the Kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world” (Matthew 24:14).



# CHAPTER 1

## CATAPULTED INTO CHANGE

There was little time to prepare and no choice. Pandemics give little warning. They simply overwhelm us. Countries went into lockdown, believers were scattered and isolated in their homes—on their own or in family groups. Ministers and church leaders were left without control, scrambling to give some sense of continuity and community.

It was like being thrust unexpectedly and unwillingly onto an unstable, fragile bridge spanning a deep chasm. There was no way back—and it was a long way to the other side.

Near Gilgit in the Hunza region of northern Pakistan is the Hussaini Hanging Bridge, considered the most dangerous swing bridge in the world. Without doubt, there are few other bridges that have thrust me so instantly and unexpectedly into liminal space.<sup>1</sup> Its sheer length (more than 155 metres or 510 feet long), the awe-inspiring surrounds of high snow-capped rocky peaks, and the fragile nature of its construction, suspended over a rushing torrent of freezing water many metres below, create a sense of insecurity and fear.

Taking careful steps on rough-hewn bush timbers, spaced perhaps 40 to 50 centimetres (16 to 20 inches) apart on a couple of wires stretching across the abyss, with another couple of wires above to hold—without safety provisions—creates a sense of familiarity (you are on a bridge), yet at the same time the sense that all is not quite right (that you are not really in the right place!). There are physical, mental, social and spiritual dimensions.

When church buildings closed, there was no way back. Yes, some have reopened with restrictions, but it is different. We have been forced to move forward with much of what we had relied on out of reach—and the future uncertain. As we become more aware of the insidious nature of the invisible deadly enemy among us, the reality is dawning: we will be on this bridge for some time and church on the other side will be different.

### **Scrambling in retreat**

The immediate response of churches was to pull back—and to pour energy into delivering familiar programming. For decades, even centuries, the main feature of church has been attending a worship-preaching event each weekend, somewhere between 9.30 am and midday. Therefore, with buildings closed, it seemed that for church to be church as much of this weekly program as feasible needed to be replicated, otherwise church would no longer exist—even though it was no longer possible to do all: sermons, singing, sacraments and socialising.

Using technology, those who had usually sat within four walls listening to music and a preacher could continue sitting within four walls listening to performance music and a preacher, only now at home in front of a small screen.

This brought into sharp relief a major shift: what was once defined as church had come to an end. It was a new reality. Of course, some had already been making this transition pre-COVID-19, attending less frequently in-person, perhaps engaging with online preachers. However, it is now different for everyone. Even if only more relaxed, sitting in a different place while following the same programming, we have become familiar with church in different forms.

And where church buildings have re-opened, it is not the same. We have learned that we don't need to go in-person to a church building to be followers of Jesus or faithful church members. New habits have formed, as well as fresh realisations.

## **What have we experienced during COVID-19?**

Church has been redefined. Many have appreciated online worship options, with church services live-streamed or available for viewing at their convenience. While churches have relied on this model, it has been difficult to determine the participation level of members—and believers are finding their own frames for church:

- With their church building closed, two siblings were isolated. However, being allowed one visitor to their home, they invited an atheist friend to join them for a meal and spiritual discussion. When restrictions lifted, allowing 10 to gather, others—including some who were not regular church attendees—joined these young professional

women. The Bible is read, with prayer, food and fellowship. For them, this is now church.

- When their church went online, five or six older couples initiated a Zoom Bible class following a series of structured Bible lessons, with participants taking turns leading segments of the study. The lively discussion lasts for 60–90 minutes, after which each couple chooses an online worship service that they enjoy—some with congregations a thousand kilometres from their home churches. Some don't expect to return to where they once attended. Their church experience has been redefined.
- With the COVID-19 lockdown, one pastor decided not to be an online preacher. Instead he took the opportunity to facilitate Bible discussions in households. Using Zoom, he connected with 30 households, introduced a Bible passage, then sent them into breakout rooms to read and discuss using the *Discovery Bible Reading* process (see [www.following-jesus.com/resources](http://www.following-jesus.com/resources)). The groups return to the main room to report on their discoveries and commitments. This process is used for prayer meetings, worship and the Lord's Supper, with the number of groups multiplying quickly to more than 40. This is church.
- One country pastor reports, “My members could return to the building, but not all want to. They have learned that church can be experienced in homes with families and friends. They feel they get more from reading and discussing the Bible this way. And some just want to walk outdoors and call that church.”
- Some larger city churches have increased their options, with online worship services for some and a variety of Bible reading and smaller worship groups clustered around households for others, as restrictions allow.
- Two regional city congregations share as one, with 45 minutes in breakout rooms for children's Bible lessons and activities, as well as an adult Bible curriculum and discussion. Then as many as 45 homes share another 60 minutes online together, with music, prayer, biblical reflections, a 3- to 4-minute video report on their support for foreign mission, a brief update on housing they are providing for local families devastated by natural disasters, with a 20- to 30-minute Bible study

with questions and discussion. For them, this is now church—and they love it.

- A group of 16- and 17-year-old girls get together to read through the life-story of Jesus. Using *Following Jesus* (Signs Publishing, 2017) and *Messiah* (Pacific Press, 2003) as guides to a harmonisation of the gospels, they explore and apply Jesus' life and teachings to their lives. It might not yet be what they would call church, but it is certainly becoming their faith community—and they are encouraging more of their friends to do the same.

- A middle-aged couple enjoy online Bible classes. They are not into music, so had usually avoided attending pre-COVID-19 church for the music or singing. They don't look for online sermons or denominational events, but they love online discussions. They appreciate seeing the names of other people on their Zoom screens and feel they have gotten to know more people by name in their online chats than they ever met at in-person church.

- For my wife Judy and I, church has been redefined. We decided to read the Scriptures together for church and have read through Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Acts. We take a long walk, share a nice lunch, phone to talk and pray with non-Christian neighbours, visit with our children and grandkids online, and usually close the day with a friend who lives alone as we eat our separate evening meals using Facetime to connect—also sharing the Lord's Supper. During the week, we visit and support neighbours, connecting by phone or Facetime. This is church.

- One of our friends, who lives on her own, always attends an online Bible class and values the fellowship and discussion, appreciating the opportunity to listen in on the weekly sermon. This church has not provided opportunities for the Lord's Supper, so this is something special that Judy and I sometimes celebrate by Facetime with her.

## **It is not the same!**

Some have now returned to worship in church buildings but are not finding it the same as before. In some countries or states, restrictions were relaxed, but then imposed again with a second wave of infection. Even where they

can, not all are rushing back. Some of the elderly are hesitant—unsure that it is safe—and are watching online or creating their own church experiences.

Families with one or more parents involved as frontline health professionals hesitate to mix in larger gatherings. With distancing requirements, some churches require prospective attendees to register online before attending—with attendance numbers limited—redefining the idea of church being open to all believers and even drop-in visitors. It seems that the church of pre-COVID-19 times no longer exists.

## DISCUSSION

1. What have you learned about your local church during this pandemic?<sup>2</sup>
2. In what ways has your church been reshaped by this pandemic?
  - What do people want to hang on to?
  - What have you let go?
  - What were you not doing that should be done?
3. How has this pandemic changed your view of church?
4. What are the most essential skills that believers need to learn to engage in church and mission in the new reality?
5. As churches return to church buildings, how will you feel if some believers decide to continue church in their households?

# CHAPTER 2

## FIVE THINGS COVID-19 TAUGHT US ABOUT CHURCH

Being thrust onto a fragile suspension bridge exposes our fears. It is so fraught with danger that truths are revealed. What has the pandemic revealed about church? What have we learned? You will identify others, but here are five things I have learned:

### **1. Few were ready to be church**

Put simply, the church was not prepared to be church. This is not about out-of-date databases or a lack of preparedness for online services. For decades we have heard that the church exists for: (1) worship, (2) service, (3) evangelism and disciple-making, (4) fellowship, and (5) obedient discipleship (see Matthew 22:37–40; 28:16–20; Acts 2:42–47)—but COVID-19 revealed that most were not ready for any of these.

As the virus spread, pastors and leaders rushed to get programs in place for their people—but why? Have not believers been skilled and released to worship, serve, share faith, build relationships, grow as disciples and make disciples? Have they been spoon-fed for so long that they do not know how to read their Bibles, or connect and share with family and neighbours? Has COVID-19 exposed an underlying weakness?

### **2. There is no church without local church**

This crisis has provided a confronting reminder that church is local and it does not need to meet in a church building to be church. While Jesus spoke of church being “two or three” gathered in His name (see Matthew 18:15–20), many have been surprised to see that church is much more local than they had imagined. All have been forced to experience church in their homes as local households of faith—as the church did in its first centuries.

Local church needs to be trusted and released. In the shutdown and

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