

Reinventing Church for a Period of Social Distancing

Rev. Ross Smillie, Sunnybrook United Church, Red Deer, AB March 17, 2020

The cancellation of most worship services and many other regular church activities requires some really creative thinking about how to respond to this COVID-19 virus pandemic. On the one hand, the extreme measures are being taken for good reasons: to slow the spread of the virus, prevent a catastrophically overloaded health care system and save lives. On the other hand, social distancing will generate many other problems: social isolation, mental health challenges, spiritual questions, economic dislocation, and much more. In order to continue to support our extended congregation, we need to reinvent ourselves from a church that functions mainly in person, to one that effectively connects with people who are not able to gather together physically. This reinvention is probably long overdue, as there are many people who have been distancing themselves from our Sunday worship for years. This health emergency is an opportunity to reinvent ourselves for the long term. This proposal is an invitation to creative dialogue about how the church can go beyond survival and learn to thrive in a time of social distancing.

There are five traditional marks or purposes of the church: Worship/Celebration (*leiturgia*), Proclamation of the Good News of God's Love in Christ (*kerygma*), Teaching/Training (*Didache*), Fellowship (*koinonia*), Service (*diakonia*). In what follows I propose several ways in which we can creatively fulfill those purposes of the church. This list is not intended to be exhaustive but a discussion starter, in which all those who care about the church and the good news of God's love are invited to be creative in finding new ways to engage as a community of love, hope, faith, and joy.

Worship/Celebration:

- Our congregational music team, soloists, choir and worship band be invited to offer a series of mini concerts that can be livestreamed through Facebook (all you need is a cell phone), or other means of choice. Perhaps this could happen once a week and available through our Facebook page and webpage. Groups like the worship band and choir would need to determine if they can do this and maintain social distancing.
- The minister could write and circulate a pastoral prayer once per week and other prayers from the Moderator and the wider church be shared more often. These prayers could be posted on Facebook, circulated by email, and/or spoken in a phone call to those who do not use electronic communication.
- The congregation be invited to submit concerns and celebrations to the church office for inclusion in each week's pastoral prayer.
- Links to mini-concerts and Minister's Messages be included in an email with the Pastoral Prayer.
- Advertise times when the church building will be open for prayer and personal reflection
- Set up meditation centres in the church building for personal use during Holy Week, Good Friday, Easter

Proclamation:

- The Minister livestream/record a Message each week including Scripture readings, poetry, and reflections similar to the traditional Sunday morning sermon/message.
- Messages from the Moderator and other United Church sources (primarily but not exclusively) be shared as appropriate.
- Daily email featuring poetry, artwork and insight from congregational members

Fellowship/Community: (This will be really important, given the risk of social isolation that may be faced by single people, the elderly and young families with children):

- Develop a phone fan out by which volunteers call a few people every week, for conversation, encouragement and information sharing. The minister and other church leaders could identify news, questions and other resources to support this ministry.
- Develop an Adopt a Grandparent program to connect children and seniors in the congregation – grandparents initiate a phone .
- Develop a means of connecting young families in the congregation with each other, that can be used for support, practical help and encouragement.

Teaching/Training: (if people are staying home with lots of time on their hands, there could be significant interest in opportunities for education and training). Here are a few suggestions:

- The Kids Club Coordinator email age-appropriate links to resources for children at least once a week.
- The minister and other church leaders develop and maintain a curated list of books, websites, podcasts, YouTube videos, and other resources on spiritual, biblical, and theological topics, and other issues related to the mission of the church. Adults be encouraged to stretch by the resources offered. Over time an online book club could engage in discussion on a common book once a month (books could be accessed through Kindle, Kobo, Amazon, Audible, etc.) People could watch a suggested video and engage in online discussion.

Service: (given the economic dislocation being caused by the pandemic, there will likely be a dramatic increase in people facing financial challenges. The most immediate need, and one the church historically has helped with, is food. The Food Bank and other organizations are already overloaded and we can expect that to get worse. Since the minister will not be able to meet with people requesting support, we need a way to get food to people who are having difficulty. Here are a number of strategies that can be used. Not all may apply in all situations:

- Maintain contact with the Food Bank and other relevant organizations and share information with the congregation.
- Review policies for the congregation's Benevolent Fund (or equivalent). If there isn't one, set some simple criteria (e.g. a \$50 limit for individuals and \$100 for families) and invite contributions.

- Buy gift cards which can be distributed to trusted clients (note that gift cards can be easily abused by addicts who sell them on the streets).
- Set up online ordering accounts with Superstore, Walmart, etc. If possible identify the feature by which a guest can place an order which the congregation later pays for using a credit card.
- The minister and/or volunteers review requests over the phone, then arranges to use one of the following mechanisms for getting food to the person making the request.
 - o ask clients to use a guest account . The client is responsible for picking up the order from the appropriate grocery store. If the delivery charge is reasonable, then it could be delivered.
 - o The client could visit the grocery store, do their own shopping, up to the preagreed limit, and then the minister or volunteer could pay the bill.
 - o Alternatively, a volunteer could do the shopping for the client, and drop it off, maintaining social distance.
 - o The church develop hampers of basic necessities that can be distributed as needed. (the problem with this strategy is that perishables are hard to keep in stock.
- To review requests for help with bigger needs (utilities, rent, etc.), a small team of deacons be established. All such requests, to require at least a week of advance notice, and require documentation (bills, eviction notices, etc.)
- Volunteers monitor websites and social media sites focused on “how you can help” to identify other ways of being supportive.