

Back to the Future: Returning to Worship in Churches

Preparing to Return to Corporate Worship

Reflections Family, Discipleship and the Christian Life 29 April 2020

As I sat down to finalise the online sermon for next Sunday, it occurred to me that sooner or later we would go back to our regular Sunday worship in our respective churches. I wondered whether the clergy, church managers, and other church leaders had begun to chart the strategy for receiving their members when that time comes. I also wondered how prepared believers are to return to their place in the pew. The truth is that we have no way of knowing whether the coronavirus, which has shaken the very foundations of the earth, will vanish as mysteriously as it appeared. We do not know what residual effects will threaten us, nor for how long. The general consensus is that the coronavirus, or its after-effects, will not go away soon. So far, the world has only been defending itself; we have yet to find ways to fight it and eradicate it altogether.

One thing is certain: we can worship the merciful God from anywhere, and churches — I do not mean the universal Church, the Body of Christ, but the buildings themselves — are simply structures built for people to gather and offer corporate worship. Will there be a redefining of our worship? A reboot, for a fresh start? Much collective thinking by church leaders is needed to answer these questions. Is that happening?

Churches have a great deal to consider as they prepare to welcome people back into their sanctuaries. In addition to cleaning taking on an unprecedented priority — a customised cleaning policy that may include shampooing the carpets, or removing them altogether, sanitising pews, bathrooms, doorknobs, light switches, and microphones, and the proper use of disinfectants — some believe that communicating these new cleaning policies will take on more importance than communicating the theme of the next sermon series.

I tend to believe that people will remain sceptical of crowds. How soon can we give up the social distancing we have been practising these past months? Should the norm of five or six people to a pew change? What of the ushering practices? Those assigned this task should receive clear guidance on "checking in" people and seating them in the pews. Are we, then, looking at multiple, shortened services every Sunday? Or should we hold services on Saturdays too? Should churches give up the handshake, the fellowship gathering over a cup of coffee or tea after the service? All of this will bring great pressure to bear upon the clergy and church leaders.

And, of course, one must also think about giving and counting practices — moving to electronic money transfers, point-of-sale terminals at the church, and so on. Better financial planning and expenditure control should be put in place, with greater allowance made to meet contingencies.

These are but a few basic thoughts. There is no time to waste. Plans must be made without delay, even as we wait for the country to set out its own plans for the phased relaxation of the strict controls now in place. Are you prepared?