



The Coronavirus Crisis

SUBSCRIBE TO CORONAVIRUS DAILY

'Things Will Never Be The Same.' How The Pandemic Has Changed Worship

May 20, 2020 · 9:21 AM ET

TOM GJELTEN

5-Minute Listen

PLAYLIST Download



Credit: Cornelia Li for NPR

Christian worship in the United States, long characterized by its adherence to tradition, appears to have been significantly altered by the coronavirus pandemic.

"Things will never be the same," says Harry Moreaux in Naples, Fla., one of nearly 400 churchgoers who shared with NPR how the pandemic has changed their views of church life and their expectations for worship in the months and years ahead.

"I love my fellow brothers and sisters in God," Moreaux wrote. "I used to go to many church-related activities like Bible studies and men's fellowship. Now we barely communicate by text."

A survey by the Pew Research Center in April found more than 90% of regular churchgoers in the United States saying their churches had closed their doors to combat the spread of the coronavirus, with the vast majority saying that worship services had moved entirely online. Social hours and church suppers are a thing of the past, at least for now.

The changes are not all negative. Many pastors have intensified efforts to stay in touch with members of their congregations and maintain their church communities.

"This crisis has actually caused us to do a better job of picking up the phone and checking on our members," says Randal Lyle, senior pastor at Meadowridge Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas. "It's made me refocus on connecting individually with people. I have our staff checking on every elderly person in the congregation every couple of weeks to see what they need and how we can serve them. So there are some connections that are probably stronger now than they were before."

Article continues below

Subscribe to the Coronavirus Daily Podcast

NPR ONE

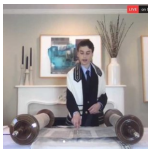
APPLE PODCASTS

GOOGLE PODCASTS

POCKET CASTS

SPOTIFY

RSS



The shift to online communication on platforms such as Zoom has also introduced some new efficiencies.

Claire Anderson, 45, a devoted member of North River Church of Christ in Marietta, Ga., had been attending worship services at least twice a week with her family, plus leading Bible study sessions with other church members. Under the shutdown, she says, she's been able to do even more.

"I don't have to drive an hour to sit down and read the Bible with someone," she says. "I can do it all from home. There's no running to meetings. There's no strain on my kids. There's no strain on my husband. I'm not always rushing somewhere."

Anderson's spiritual life, she says, may even have been strengthened during this time. "It's almost like God is sending everyone to their room for a time out," she says. "With all the business taken away, I can just be still and really focus on my relationship with God."

Drifting away from church

In some cases, however, the coronavirus shutdowns have weakened church connections. The Pew survey and a survey by the Public Religion Research Institute found that one-third or more of those who had previously attended church regularly were not bothering to watch online services. For those whose church affiliation was already tenuous, the disconnect may be permanent.

"I wasn't regularly attending church anyway," says Beth Daniel, 50, of Mounds View, Minn., "so it really hasn't changed anything. But now I feel less guilty about not going. I thought at first [the pandemic] might encourage me to do more online worship, but it really hasn't." Though raised in an evangelical tradition, Daniel says she has found her own time and space for spiritual connection, "and it doesn't usually happen on Sunday mornings."

But Mary McGrath, 26, whose church affiliation has likewise been slipping, has reacted to the coronavirus shutdown in the opposite way, with a new yearning to return to the Catholic parish she left as a college student.



"Down at my foundation, faith has a strong role, one I've kind of repressed or disregarded," she says. "And I've realized that when you're especially alone, something I haven't really experienced before, it's something I would really like to be able to fall back on. I was very surprised to have that feeling just hit me. Like, 'Wow, I would really like to be in a pew right now, in a place that's bigger and holier than I am.'"

Clearly, the way churchgoers are reacting to the pandemic depends in good part on their past experience. For John Chadwick, 73, a retired Lutheran pastor in Iowa, 40 years of preaching have left him feeling that his faith no longer provides the answers he needs.

"I look at the virus, and I wonder," he says. "As a pastor, I always say, 'We need to trust God in all this.' And that's OK, to say that. But I gotta admit, for me, I wonder where God is, which is not great for a pastor. I realize that, but that's where I am today."

The importance of singing

One of the most disturbing changes for Christians has been the suspension of congregational singing and church choirs. Health experts say the coronavirus is easily spread through singing, but music is an essential part of the worship experience for many churchgoers, especially in the Protestant tradition.

"I would never have heard my call to the priesthood if I hadn't found my faith through song," says Rev. Jennifer Reddall, the Episcopal bishop for the diocese of Arizona. She was announcing the guidelines under which Episcopal churches in her diocese would be allowed to reopen. A ban on singing and choral performances was the restriction that Reddall said was most personally upsetting.

"I'm not even sure I would be a Christian today if I wasn't able to pray by singing," Reddall said in a video message to the members of her diocese. "But I don't want to kill someone by my prayer or by my music."

For Episcopal parishioners in Arizona, the only music option now available is to follow the church program at home.

"I've been doing that," says Rachel Sampson in Tucson, "but it's starting to feel really sad and hard for me, where I'm just sitting in my living room, singing by myself. I was

doing more when this all started, but now that we're eight or nine weeks into it, I'm starting to feel disconnected from it."



THE CORONAVIRUS CRISIS

Passover Celebrations Take Shape Differently To Work Around The Coronavirus

The sense of growing separation from one's church community under pandemic conditions may be most acute for those who have depended on that community for support. In Kansas City, Mo., what Sara DeVoto treasured most about her Methodist church family was how it was a "lifeline" for her and her husband when their baby son died shortly after birth.

"They came to the hospital at 4 a.m.," she says. "They made sure we had meals. They made sure our other child was getting interaction, and they helped with babysitting. Our church community was able to pray over me when I couldn't pray. It was a time that I wish hadn't happened, but it was also a time that I never felt, ever, alone."

Having experienced that support, DeVoto is now saddened that providing it to someone else would be next to impossible under the current conditions. "Look what we could do in a time of tragedy that we can't do now," she says. "It's hard when we're just reaching out with phone calls to see if someone is OK. Do they really need more?" That interaction, she says, is now more difficult than it used to be "when we could stop by and go into someone's house and see what they need."

Support, solace and a spiritual bond are some of the things that matter in a worship experience. For some people, those are also the things they now realize their church was not providing. Under the coronavirus shutdowns, such distinctions have become all the clearer.

worship church coronavirus god religion

More Stories From NPR

HEALTH

Tear-Gassing Protesters During An Infectious Outbreak Called 'A Recipe For Disaster'

HEALTH

On Dying Alone: 'Behind Every COVID-19 Case, There Is A Story'

GLOBAL HEALTH