

So Church is Canceled

A Simple Tip Sheet for How to Do Ministry During COVID-19

If you're reading this, it's probably because somebody told you, "Hey, I found a nice tip-sheet for how churches can respond to COVID," and you followed the link about church cancellations here. Or, perhaps you arrived here directly.

This document is a [follow-up to my earlier tipsheet for how churches could protect themselves from COVID-19](#).

In that document, I envisioned a scenario where churches would remain open. However, in many areas, that's not an option for churches, either due to government bans on gatherings, insurmountable difficulties in creating a low-infection-risk space, or other reasons.

So this document is simply some ideas for what faithful ministry could look like during COVID-19. It's not authoritative in any way; it's just some thoughts I've collected as numerous churches have talked to me in response to my last tip-sheet.

If you want my credentials, GO READ THE OTHER DOCUMENT.

Grace and peace to you in the name of God our Father,
Lyman and Ruth Stone
Holy Word Lutheran Church
Tuen Mun, Hong Kong

The Short Version:

What's the problem with canceling church?

Church cancelations create three problems: 1) we were made for community, and isolation is bad for mental health; 2) faith is not just a set of beliefs, but a discipline and a habit, which can be disrupted; 3) the gathering-together of believers is how God delivers us many of His good gifts.

What are some general principles to guide our response?

Good question! 1) We're not replacing the Sunday assembly, but using the circumstances to do a new thing, 2) The household-unit is the target of any activities, *not* just the individual, 3) People have more time and flexibility, and desire for *something to do*, than ever.

So how can we keep doing effective ministry despite assembly limits?

1. Help church members make use of existing resources: praying the hours, reading the lectionary, and celebrating feast days. Make sure every household has basic resources like a hymnal and a catechism.
2. Live-stream Bible studies, prayer times, and short worship services, not just sermons. "Synchronous" (i.e. live) resources help your members maintain their sense of time. "Asynchronous" resources are useful, but don't neglect the "togetherness" of doing things at the same time!
3. Have your youth leaders or DCEs film TONS of short videos of games, crafts, SONGS, and skits to send out to families. Families are desperate for resources: they will use what you send them!
4. Organize a system for children and youth to call elderly members twice a week to check on them, get to know them, and talk to them.
5. Organize a system for young adults to run errands for the elderly and others vulnerable to COVID.
6. Organize a "parent share" whereby church families agree to form "closed networks" of childcare. This relieves parents, while also keeping infection risk very low.
7. Have families come to the church in household units to receive communion, or have the pastor or deacons visit families to commune.
8. Get creative: "Drive-in Movie" style services, hymn-sings-on-the-porch, "distant picnics" in the park, "kids hangouts" online, Church online gaming leagues, etc.

We are sheltered-in-place and it's hard to even keep track of what day it is! What can we do?

For most people hunkered down at home, COVID-19 can create time-disorientation: a reduced awareness of the day and the time, especially if work and school have been impacted as well. This can be a major factor in depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues. Virtually every health professional will provide the same remedy to this kind of interminable existing: STRUCTURE.

Luckily, the church has been providing structure to human lives since... forever! American Christians often only know about the minimum outlines of that structure (Sunday worship, a few major holidays, etc). But actually, the Christian "life structure" covers everything from the hours of the day to years! Long before modern work and school schedules, Christians developed disciplines of time-keeping to organize our lives around the good gifts of God!

A lot of this will be foreign to many Protestants, because it involves the "liturgical calendar," a terrible, awful, no-good name for what is actually better described as "a rubric to organize your time around Jesus." If you've ever done a daily Bible reading plan, or scheduled small group activities, then you've participated in a Christian life-organization scheme. The "liturgical calendar" is just one example of such a plan! However, it's the example that billions of Christians have been using since the earliest days of the church. The Jews before Jesus had a liturgy and a lectionary they followed as well. Before the secular world stole the right to organize time from the church by imposing strict work schedules on industrial workers and strict school schedules on children, most Christians organized their lives around the natural rhythms of the agricultural seasons, and the spiritual rhythms of the Christian calendar. The cancelation of work and school is a chance to rediscover that!

It is not a necessity to recognize the Christian calendar! The Bible is very, very clear that this is NOT REQUIRED! Many Christians ignore it! And that is not a sin, because it's just a calendar people have invented to keep time!

However, in times like these, the Christian calendar can be a great encouragement to families, and can also solve a practical problem of how NOT TO GO TOTALLY BONKERS AT HOME.

Okay, I'll bite. How can we adopt this "Christian time structuring plan"?

1. Recognize the Christian season. It's Lent right now: encourage families to do Lenten-themed crafts, provide Lenten devotions, in any video you produce, use Lenten colors. You can find Bible readings for each week, *and for every day of the year*, [shared by people around the world, at this link](#). Lent is a very convenient season for an epidemic, because Lent is all about the brokenness in our hearts and in the world. It's about Jesus' journey to the Cross and why he had to die. These are really great themes to work through with your kids during a time when they are also confused!
2. Recognize Feasts and Fasts. Many Protestants dislike Saints days. So don't recognize them as times of special intercession! Take them as a day to hear a story about a Christian martyr or teacher of the past! We can always learn from the testimonies of those who've gone before us. Here's a link to a [Calendar of the Saints for Catholics](#). Most Western Christians can use a similar calendar. You can find LCMS' [calendar of feasts here](#), and a [calendar of commemorations here](#). Use these days as excuses for special times together of prayer, learning, eating, or crafting, depending on who is in your household. [This website](#) also has some good ideas on activities to do with kids to go with Saints days.
3. Pray for the day. Did you know that Christians have been praying special prayers for each day since... forever? [Here are some examples of special prayers for the week or the day!](#)
4. Prayers for the hours. There are special prayers for different times of day! The Lutheran Service Book has special orders of service for Morning, Noon, and Evening, which are full of great music and scripture. Praying and singing "the hours" is a great way to use quarantine to orient your life towards God.
5. LEARN SONGS! One of the best things you can do is to learn songs that teach you what God says about the challenges of the day. Ruth and I are running a YouTube channel where we upload two videos a week of songs we are teaching to our school here in Hong Kong; [feel free to check it out!](#)

How can I, as a pastor, help my church members manage time-disorientation?

1. Send hymnals home with members. The LSB has services of the hours in it, daily lectionary readings, and a Christian calendar in it. It's an invaluable resource. Send it home with your members.
2. Send catechisms home with members if they don't already have them. Parents are scrambling for activities to do with their kids. Luckily, the catechism is just hundreds of pages of activities to do with kids! Make sure everybody has one.
3. Lead by example. Do these things. Video yourself and your family doing them. Post videos of your family doing Lenten crafts, praying the hours, etc. Make a point of reminding people of the day and the season. Not because these things are spiritually required, but because they will help your members manage the stressors of quarantine.
4. Livestream. Many churches will video messages and put them online. This is fine. But as much as possible, try to livestream activities for members. Providing LIVE activities at designated times helps structure the day. Sunday mornings are an especially good time to livestream. But if you want to livestream yourself praying the hours, hey, more power to you.
5. Use your church. Your members are at home. Letting them see your home is totally fine. And for Bible study and many activities, it's actually *very good* to show your members how you and your family worship at home. But the church is full of signs and symbols of the faith! Use them! Video yourself preaching from the pulpit, chanting from the chancel. Have your organist or pianist video themselves leading a song at their usual place. Do a Bible study in front of a stained glass window. Even empty, your building is useful!
6. Many short activities are better than one long one. In terms of managing time, your members will benefit more from having three 5-minute activities to organize their time around than one 15-minute activity. Also, people get bored of watching pastors on the TV. Provide a lot of small lessons, not one big lesson.

We are streaming our Sunday services online. Any tips for how to make this most useful for our members?

1. Shorter is better! Remember, people at home WILL BE DISTRACTED! Reduce your sermon length. Break up the service into smaller chunks. Using a traditional liturgy with lots of standing, sitting, and different segments is a very good idea. I mean, it's *always* a good idea, but especially for people at home with kids who just want to do somersaults, give your people digestible bits.
2. Remember the kids. The kids. The kids. The kids. They are bouncing off the walls. They have not been outside much. They are going crazy. If your online program cannot engage a 6 year old boy who hasn't been outside in 4 days for at least a few minutes, *then it is not very helpful to families*, because nobody will actually be able to watch it, because they'll be chasing the 6 year old boy who hasn't been outside in 4 days.
3. Prayer is the most useful thing you can offer. Pray for people. Take prayer requests (more on that below) and pray for them by name.
4. Interaction is helpful. If your church is small enough, using a platform like Zoom, WebEx, or Google Hangouts to allow people a chance to use a chatbox to ask questions, make prayer requests, or talk to each other can be very helpful and encouraging.
5. Give information. Try to update your congregation on the latest CDC or state health department advice. Inform them of how your state is doing with respect to COVID. If you need data on this, contact me at lymanstone@gmail.com. Do this in a calm, non-alarmist, and purely factual way. Your congregants will appreciate your lack of panic.

What about Small Groups/Home Groups/Life Groups/Bible Studies?

If small group assemblies are still legal in your area, then they're a great option for maintaining church life. However, they do pose some infection risk. So here are some thoughts on how to make these groups most useful if they are legal.

1. HYGIENE HYGIENE HYGIENE. Every small group should take every person's temperature whenever they meet. They need to wash hands often. Avoid sharing food. Consider meeting outside instead of inside. Wear masks if possible.
2. To the extent small groups meet, they should be extremely exclusive. To limit epidemic spread, members should only meet with one small group, and should discontinue ALL OTHER SOCIALIZING. You cannot allow small groups to continue without making sure participants have curtailed other social activities; otherwise the risk of an outbreak among your members remains pretty high.
3. Small groups can adopt new functions: parenting-shares! Home-school co-ops! Food-and-mask shares! Prayer trees! They can become THE major social support group for your members, providing for each other's needs.

We are really worried about all the kids home from school. Anything we can do for them?

SEND VIDEOS.

But isn't that just encouraging "screen time"?

Yes, that's an adverse consequence of the quarantine: kids are going to stare at screens a lot. But you have a choice on whether they stare at random YouTube videos, or if they're memorizing Bible verses in song.

Fair enough. What kind of videos?

1. LEARN SONGS! One of the best things you can do is to learn songs that teach you what God says about the challenges of the day. Ruth and I are running a YouTube channel where we upload two videos a week of songs we are teaching to our school here in Hong Kong; [feel free to check it out!](#)
2. SHORT catechesis lessons. No more than 5 minutes! Short, engaging lessons about the Bible are a great thing to offer families.
3. Church leaders doing silly things. Sending a 1-minute video of the pastor doing something silly will produce ENORMOUS entertainment for children. Pastors. Debase yourselves. Put on the silly hat. The cross Christ has called you to carry may be a video of you trying to eat 15 hotdogs in one minute.
4. Reproducible videos. This is a fun thing for families to do together. A youth leader can produce a video where they do something silly, or sing a single line of a song, and then send it to families to make their own version, or sing the next line of the song. Then families can share those videos among themselves.
5. Short orders of service. A video of the pastor doing all or part of a short order of service, or your music director doing a hymn for the morning, or something like that is a great thing to offer families.
6. Announcements. Don't just send an email announcement! Video yourself giving announcements, and send the video. People like videos!

Cool! But enough about kids. Is there a way we can help elderly or other vulnerable people in our church?

1. CALL THEM. There are several ways to do this. Pastors can have a call list, of course. In larger churches deacons could be roped in too. But my favorite idea is...
2. MAKE CHILDREN CALL THEM. Assign each household with kids an elderly church member that they have to call twice a week. Give them a list of questions to ask: did you ever have snow days when you were a kid? What was your job before you retired? What's your favorite memory of our church? How are you feeling today? Have you taken your temperature recently? What's your favorite flavor of ice cream? Having children call elderly members and providing fun questions for conversation is a good way to brighten an elderly person's day, teach children about care for their elders, and ensure that your elderly members are getting checked on.
3. Do their errands. This is a GREAT job for young adults, especially single young adults (more on them below). People at a high risk from COVID

infection should NOT go outside. So you can use younger, healthier people to do their errands for them. Have your vulnerable members put together shopping lists, then have younger members do the shopping. The older members could either give them their credit card to do the trip, or repay them in cash.

Wow, great! Ministry plans for kids and old people! That's our whole church right?

Errr.... No? You probably have some young adults without kids; maybe some singles?

Oh sure, but singles don't need our help. They're fine. We don't really need to do anything for them; besides they shouldn't be out dating right now due to social distancing!

Oh boy. Lots to unpack there. First of all, reducing the experience of single young adults to "finding a spouse" is.... Well, that might be why our churches don't have a lot of single young adults. But secondly, young adults without kids, and especially without spouses, are both one of the most useful, and highest-risk, populations for COVID!

What???? I thought young people were resistant to COVID!

Yes, they are! But they can still TRANSMIT the disease.

But that's not what I meant. What I actually meant was that single people living alone are ESPECIALLY lonely during shelter-in-place orders. Churches need to take care not to ignore the unique ministry needs of people who may now worry that not only are they going to die alone never having had the joy of kids and spouse, they're going to die alone *next week*.

Ouch. Okay then. So what can we do for young adults at home without kids?

1. Recognize their needs. For young people accustomed to frequent socializing, isolation can hit very hard. You should consider adding childless young adults to whatever call list the pastor or deacons

maintain, albeit perhaps not with quite as high a priority as those at higher risk of death.

2. Don't assign them child roles. Whatever you're having kids do, DON'T HAVE YOUNG ADULTS DO THOSE THINGS. Don't infantilize them!
3. Appeal to their strengths. In this case, physical resilience is a major strength. Encourage young adults in good health to eagerly run errands for more vulnerable members. Put'em to work. Do everything short of conscription. Encourage them to grow in leadership, as the usual leaders, the elders, have been temporarily taken off the board. But not just errands: encourage them to film fun videos for kids, to call each other, and even to join a parent share to provide some childcare relief.
4. But don't treat them as mere labor. Consider doing a special livestreamed short order of service and online hangout for any young adults running errands. Ensure they receive communion regularly. And especially....
5. Pray first, ask second. Don't assume that your young adult members are carefree! They may already have care duties for family members or friends with kids. They may be taking loneliness hard. They may be in financial distress, especially if they have student loans. Always open any conversation here, not by saying, "Hey, you have no real responsibilities and can be drafted to run errands!" but by asking, "What can I be praying for you about? Is there anything you need right now?"
6. But seriously, spur them on to good works. They won't die of COVID and their elders will, and those groceries MUST get delivered!