

From the heart - conversations with God online, and offline

A reflection by Marianne Ejdersten, Director of Communications for the World Council of Churches, Geneva, Switzerland

The year 2020 is one etched forever in our memories. The unimaginable happened when a virus seized the world. Vulnerability became the norm and fiction became reality. Overnight life became more precious for all of us, the world's billions. Normality took a break; frustration set in. Everything we took for granted went on hold. Society closed; offices shut; schools halted; churches sealed their doors; the hemorrhaging of money accelerated from the public purse. Anxiety and the grip of fear cripple as the most vulnerable face worsening exposure. The pandemic is hitting the world hard. So, being a church in a time of vulnerability has huge relevance. As a present church, God's presence in the world precedes all. It is in God that we live, feel, and exist. The mission of the church is to provide space for that presence at all of life's stages.

Suddenly, the world – small and big -- was in my living room. The pandemic has made us ponder what is vital and what is not. Relationships and caring for our fellow human beings, matter, stretching the neighbourly hand of love in our beautiful, fragile world. We are one world, one humanity. We must live and act together in love and care for our Creation.

Thank you for allowing me to share my reflections. I write after ten weeks in Geneva under a state of emergency dubbed an "extraordinary situation" in Switzerland, where I live and work. This invitation was to reflect on the meaning of being a church during the pandemic and how churches around the world, especially the Church of Norway, have handled the situation. Millions of people attend weekly online services around the world. Many had not been in a church for a long time but as the pandemic spread, their spiritual longing has grown, and they have found peace through online worship.

I have worked for the World Council of Churches since 2013; and as director of communications since 2014, keeping track of current issues concerning our 350 member churches in 120 countries. Since its inception in 1948, the World Council of Churches has worked for unity, justice, and peace. For the past seven years I have worked with the former general secretary, now bishop (presiding bishop) Olav Fykse Tveit. My relationship with the Church of Norway started much earlier, however. Back in 1992, I worked in Sollentuna parish, outside Stockholm. It had an active twin parish scheme with Nordic and Baltic countries, in accordance with the Porvoo Common Statement. My first meeting was with the Oppegård parish outside Oslo. When I joined the Central Church Office in Uppsala in 2003 as head of national communications, I worked closely with our Nordic communication colleagues. Work on coordinating communication for the 2003 Assembly of the Conference of European Churches in Trondheim offered an opportunity to work with the then director of Communications Dag Stange in Oslo. I made many visits to Oslo and Bergen, as well as to Trondheim. Several of the Church of Sweden's communication strategies are drawn from

Norway. The idea behind the Church of Sweden's web portal ¹comes from the Norwegian Church Abroad in Bergen. It was a privilege working with and visiting the Bergen church many times during my time with the Church of Sweden Abroad. Online pastoral care was brought home in 2010 from Kirkens SOS in Bergen. The Church of Norway has been at the forefront with its online presence and with the Faith Learning Project for several decades. This has made the Church of Norway well equipped to deal with the current global pandemic.

In addition, it has a flexible team under the leadership of Acting Preses Atle Sommerfeldt, along with a well-equipped communications team headed by Ingeborg Dybvig, to assist the activities of the church.

Focus on the Church of Norway's work

The Church of Norway is one of the 30 WCC member churches best equipped to transfer its activities online, meeting the requirements of the everyday church and the Sunday church.

I greatly admire the vital and innovative work of the Church of Norway including its digital switching. Having attended online services and taken part in online conversations, I think a major part of its success is authenticity – having the courage to be a local church. It is the local bishop or priest who welcomes their congregation to the service online; there is warmth and the sense of a personal encounter. This instils thoughts and courage, conveying the message of not being alone, but being embraced by the congregation and by God. Although not technically perfect, it is genuine. Meeting each other gives rise to heartfelt joy. The priests are often very present. They do not glance down at a sheet of paper and are ready to look directly at the camera. The services involve candlelight icons; images and flowers as well as music, fostering spirituality and creating depth. And most importantly for local people, it is familiar. The Church of Norway's bishops are good role models, sharing aspects of their everyday lives on social media, and their way of communicating and writing texts on their own is special. I am happy to follow bishop Solveig Fiske, bishop Herborg Finnset and bishop Ann-Helen Fjeldstad-Junes on social media as role models. Another role model is the general secretary of the Church of Norway Council on Ecumenical and International Relations Berit Hagen-Agoy. Her specialty is storytelling in a warm and inviting way. In many parts of the world, church leaders communicate more formally. But in this case, it is personal, authentic, and real. I hope the bishops continue this way. The secret of its success is daring to be authentic and personal without being private.

Glimpses of the world

It's time to take a look around the world. So, to start in Asia: in Seoul, South Korea. Pastor Jonggoo Kim ²is the leader of one of the largest Methodist churches in Seoul, with just over 2,000 visitors every Sunday. When the Korean government issued instructions regarding a

¹ <https://www.svenskakyrkan.se/>

² <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/webinar-draws-lively-global-audience-seeking-how-to-be-the-church-when-buildings-are-closed>

state of emergency, the church closed and arranged services online. The church furnished a small television studio in its large building so the surroundings would be familiar to people. Around five people directed the Sunday service, with a reading, a sermon, music, and reflection. They invited people to join in a conversation in a YouTube chat, which a team moderated after the sermon. They also offered weekly Bible study, prayer groups and discussion groups. A pastoral welfare team made face masks, sent to everyone in the parish.

In Jerusalem, Patriarch Theophilos III of Jerusalem said in an interview³ that, for the first time ever, they were unable to hold Easter services in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. A small team of church leaders conducted services in the church that was broadcast live online, bringing together more than a million followers over Easter weekend.

In another interview, Orthodox Archbishop Anastasios of Albania⁴ underlined the importance of following the instructions of the authorities and not putting people's lives at risk. He said, "We must cherish every human life as being in God's image." The religious leaders of Albania worked closely with the authorities from day one. Archbishop Anastasios told me that it is important to pray and show the solidarity of love. The church must instill hope and courage at such a time. In my conversation with Archbishop Anastasios about the role of churches, he spoke about the choice between giving instructions, making statements, or sending pastoral letters. "Pray, the power of prayer is what we need today. Prayer gives strength and inspires hope," he said.

In the United States, Germany, and Finland, where there is extensive experience of televised church services, a trend was observed that parishes with a long history of online activities were able to transition within a couple of days. Others had much greater difficulty in finding their role. Three categories of churches were observed:

- 1) those that live-streamed the Sunday service on the internet without adaptations. These were the ones without much experience of being an online church.
- 2) those that adapted the liturgy to suit the online setting, that took great pains to create presence and an intimate atmosphere. They made special programmes, sometimes pre-recorded.
- 3) those that created teams of priests, musicians, communicators, and volunteers who devised an entire concept of worship, conversation and reflection, more in-depth knowledge, and Bible study. The third category also strove to continue to take the collection online, with the aim of giving to the most vulnerable.

In the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, Archbishop Elpidophoros invited people to attend online services and subsequent coffee meetings, the head of the ecumenical department Dr. Nicolas Kazarian tells me. It was important for them to plan the liturgy so it

³ <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/wcc-questions-posed-to-his-most-godly-beatitude-patriarch-theophilus-iii-of-jerusalem>

⁴ <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/archbishop-anastasios-let-us-transmit-from-heart-to-heart-the-light-of-hope-1>

could be recognized from meetings in a physical church buildings, and that it was handled with equal dignity. The Archbishop and his team have been available for continued discussions on social media using mainly tools such as Facebook and Twitter.

In Latin America, several parishes have chosen to combine hybrid live-streamed services with a few people present in the church building along with a chat on WhatsApp. Those who take part in the broadcast service write their names and location and who is with them in a WhatsApp group, at the beginning of the intercession. The sermon is short and conversations with the priest are conducted on WhatsApp.

In Africa, priests and church leaders have played a vital role in dealing with false and misleading information and unsound theology regarding COVID-19. This has lingered as a threat during the COVID-19 crisis, intensified by a lack of water and food in different parts of Africa. In Africa, many have found the best way to reach people with church messages is to use WhatsApp and radio. Many prayer groups meet on WhatsApp. Local priests combine WhatsApp chat, sharing pre-recorded video clips of sermons and testimony.

There are other parts of the world that have no internet access, so they have had to work with church services on the radio, or sermons and prayers printed on posters outside post offices or grocery stores.

Early in the crisis, Pope Francis promptly decided to live-stream services. This also included his blessing in St Peter's Square, which brings together hundreds of thousands of people each week. St Peter's Square for some weeks lay empty, except for a few journalists reporting on the video broadcast from the Pope's library.

A friend who is a Protestant church priest in Italy, one of the hardest-hit countries in Europe, told me that in normal cases, 25–30 people turned up at his services but there are now 225–270 people attending online every Sunday. They get in touch and need to talk and receive pastoral care more often. So, the role of preaching and prayer has been strengthened online. It requires greater preparation, however. My friend commented: "I will keep my online congregation going forward."

Being a contemporary church

The church does so much good! And therein lies a challenge to us all — not to take the responsibilities entrusted to us lightly. For the sake of our fellow human beings; for God's sake. But most importantly -- we have a mission – a calling as it is described in the Lutheran tradition! A few years ago, we celebrated the Reformation, which began 500 years ago. Once again, we have reason to consider in our time what it means to be an Evangelical-Lutheran church, in fellowship with other Lutheran churches throughout the world and in our ecumenical relationship with other Christian churches. It is now time to reflect on being a church during the pandemic and to consider how we operate as a church, now and in the future. The interim activities with online congregations cannot be shelved, and we cannot go back to simply holding services in our beautiful church buildings when there are thousands upon thousands of souls waiting and longing to join us online. They may not be

able to come to church for a variety of reasons. But they have found a home online. So, how do we shape the mission of being a church in 2021?

Can spiritual meeting places and services combine using church buildings and online?

Following the global pandemic, I think the activities of churches will move with the times because our resources will limit us. I also believe that many church websites will be redesigned. That will empower them to become more of a church hub at the centre of life – a church for all, a resting place, a meeting venue, and a haven in which to grow. It is important to broaden our perspectives while thinking locally, and globally. Notably, many Lutheran churches have more institutional websites where they offer services such as baptisms, confirmations, weddings, and funerals. I believe in a more vibrant online church that generates curiosity in God and the church, a down to earth church which touches the heart and that invites people to engage in prayer and learn more about their faith.

In times such as ours, it takes courage for the church to engage in new pathfinding. All change meets resistance and questioning. But we must build courage to sustain faith in our mission, to go out and convert everyone into disciples. How this is achieved varies in each era.

Courage to be a pioneer

My own development work with my team in the Church of Sweden in 2009 comes to mind. It concerned the 2009 church elections, a vital task, to generate attention for the Church of Sweden and invite 5.6 million people eligible to vote. The budget was 10 million Swedish kronor. The big question was how to arouse people's curiosity about God and the church and to invite people to the church election. Working with an advertising agency, we came up with a concept that led many people to ask the question⁵: can we really do this? Is this the right way to go? It was challenging, and I was asked to evaluate the messages with my team. I even received a searching question from a couple of bishops and some representatives from the management team: do you really believe in this idea? A couple of them asked an even tougher question. Was I prepared to leave my post if it didn't turn out well? I answered yes to both of their questions. The controversial question: is it possible to pray online? We launched a prayer web, and our church was one of the first in the world have interactive prayer. That was eleven years ago, and then it was a bold move to take the heart's conversation with God online. Now almost everyone has a prayer web – despite some internal resistance in 2009. You're never a prophet in your own hometown, as the Bible says. But the venture was accepted with immense joy by the Swedish people, the media loved it and we received over 20,000 prayers in two months and visitors from 98 different countries. Bishop Eva Brunne and I had around 200 media interviews in a month. The campaign garnered a string of awards, including the Gold and Grand Prix as the best interactive and digital venture of 2010 in Europe. It was followed by a paperback book featuring a selection of the prayers. From this I learned the value of believing in one's own

⁵ <https://forsman.co/work/church-of-sweden/campaign-for-prayers>

ideas, of pondering being a contemporary church and of working in a team for no one is an island. It is important to follow the existing policies and guidelines. The Central Board of the Church of Sweden established a communication platform in 2004 that provided guidance, focusing on presence, openness, and hope. Theology and communication must go hand, integrated and all-pervasive.

The World Council of Churches at the heart of this world

Finally, what role has the World Council of Churches played in the centre of all this? We have continued to play a crucial role working with member churches all over the world, ⁶with international Geneva and with the World Health Organisation (WHO), five minutes from the Ecumenical Centre. The UN, UNICEF, ILO, UNHCR, IOM and Red Cross are all within walking distance, and all are close partners of the WCC. The WCC's employees have served as advisors to the WHO on issues regarding churches and other religions. It has acted as a key hub for reaching out to the global population with vital information. These have been intense weeks. It took just over two weeks to transform the WCC in Geneva into an online organisation, along with the Ecumenical Institute in Bossey with its Masters' students and our Jerusalem, New York, and Nairobi offices. The digital journey went smoothly, possibly because we are used to working globally and meeting online. For three weeks, the management team headed by the then general secretary Olav Fykse Tveit met every day on Skype, Monday to Friday at 9 a.m. We then trimmed this to twice a week. We chose to quickly cancel all meetings and all trips. We invested in new technology platforms. Nine members of staff have formed a panel of experts to provide member churches with advice on theology, collaboration, gender, children and young people and pastoral welfare. Pastoral letters were sent out to all churches ahead of Easter weekend about praying at home. ⁷

A dedicated web page for COVID-19 ⁸was created in four languages: English, German, French and Spanish. My communications team works in eight countries, and from four continents. I reorganized them from day one, and they have been divided into different groups to manage online production; materials for churches such as those for Bible study and more in-depth knowledge; strategies and support; and to file all the good suggestions from around the world. Demand for information, communication and advice has been high. It has been a special time to be director of Communications at the World Council of Churches, when most of our organization requires support, ongoing training, and advice from the communications team. We have sought support in each other's skills sets and formed an advisory group of communications officers in regions in different parts of the world. We will emerge with more experience, wisdom, and new, positive thoughts about being a prophetic voice. We are focused on searching for new pathways and having the

⁶ <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/one-human-family-wcc-publishes-its-annual-review-2019>

⁷ <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/wcc-urges-give-highest-priority-to-protect-life>

⁸ <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/covid-19>

courage to choose and make changes. To sum with a few words from Sören Kierkegaard:
“To dare is to lose one’s footing momentarily. Not to dare is to lose oneself.”

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Link to the World Council of Churches

<https://www.oikoumene.org/en>