



Worship in Lockdown

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1. Introduction

Kilburn Methodist Church is a vibrant congregation in northwest London. Its roots in the area run deep. In 1866, two women founded a Methodist society; by 1868 they had raised enough funds to build a church. Today, the congregation is predominantly West African. Prior to the pandemic, the average attendance on a Sunday morning numbered approximately fifty.

In March 2020, when the UK government announced the new restrictions, the church leaders worked swiftly to move their services online. Since the very first Sunday of lockdown, Kilburn Methodist Church has gathered weekly, via Zoom, for corporate worship. Lia Shimada (the interviewer) lives locally and has known this congregation for five years.

A couple of months into the pandemic, in late May, some of the church leaders agreed to an online conversation with Lia. Over virtual coffee, they reflected together on their experience of 'Worship in Lockdown'.

2. Participants

Nancy (IT and Zoom administrator)

Janet (Local Preacher; Circuit Secretary; *de facto* choir director)

Ade (Local Preacher)

Jemima (Steward and music leader)

Zarina (Steward and music leader)

Jonathan (Minister)

Lia (Interviewer)

3. Transcript (edited)

Lia [0:00] *When the lockdown happened, what was your initial reaction? What was your reaction, not just to the lockdown, but to, to what it would mean for the, for the church?*

David [0:15] My initial reaction was one of shock and disappointment. Because religion is supposed to be a source of comfort and

reassurance in times of confusion, in times of suffering, like this pandemic that we are in. And then to see the very place we want to look for these answers being closed down – I was really very disappointed. I know there is a need to limit ritual gatherings, and to comply with safety regulations. But for some of us believers, religion is the fundamental source of spiritual healing and for hope.

Janet [0:57] It was for me, hopeful. I felt hopeful, and I also felt that it was an opportunity. And, and it was about grabbing that opportunity to do things differently.

Zarina [1:10] I was thinking about all the other things, but because church is so foundational, I didn't even think about that stopping. So when it did stop, I was really shocked.

Lia [1:24] I think what was really amazing about your congregation is how quickly you shifted online. I know a lot of other churches waited a couple of weeks to see what happened. But actually from the beginning, from that very first Sunday, you all just kind of clubbed together and, and really got the Zoom conference going, didn't you?...It's I think really remarkable that from the beginning, you just made it happen.

Lia [1:47] *So, you know, thinking about the, the series of online services that you've done, thinking about how you've experienced them, in, in your opinion, what are both its gifts but also its limitations?*

Jemima [2:01] I think in terms of the gifts, it really emphasized and showed that how the physical building isn't as important as a lot of people made it out to be. Because the most important thing about church is community and fellowship, and, and being together where we're studying the Word, singing, worshipping together, and being united in that sense. So the fact that we can still do this, without being in a physical building, just shows how unimportant that really was. And that the most important thing is, is being together...

What I miss is actually singing together. We can't really do that because of the, you know, the timings and the lapse and everything [on Zoom]. So that's something that I miss: hearing voices coming together. But I think the, the positive for me outweighs the negative. We, we still can connect and until we go back to normal, there are, there are other ways. And, and I think in life, you have to do that when one thing doesn't work out, how, how do you overcome? And what do you do instead? And that's what it's all about really.

Ade [3:17] I think, just like Jemima said, it, it just goes to show, show us that God is not just within the four walls and what we should be

doing as Methodists, anyway – because that’s the way it started – is now being done...

[3:35] The negative is, for me, is just the fact that there is no synchronization, so we can’t sing...We are still singing, albeit within our [homes]. You don’t know how much voice I’m belting out within my house! So, so it’s just that I’m not hearing other people.

Jonathan [3:52] I can actually hear you, Ade, from here. I think, ‘That must be Ade’.

Janet [4:02] The other gift for me is this: that there are people who have, are not able to join church physically, for one reason or the other. And because they now don’t have to leave their home, you know, to be able to worship, they are joining in.

Jonathan [4:22] Can I just say something about Zoom that I thought was important because when, when the lockdown happened, I thought: well, it will be good to do something online, but how are we going to do it? And I was quite uncomfortable about doing Facetime, Facebook Live, or, or a YouTube channel. Because I wanted us to have some element of fellowship about it, and to have some contact. And that’s what I think is great about Zoom is that even though it’s not being in the same room as each other, we can all see each other. It is live. And it’s not just me, or the preacher, talking to you. We can have different readers speaking live, as well. But also there’s that brief moment at the beginning and the end, which is highly chaotic, but quite lovely, when we all say hello to everybody.

David [5:06] I know it is not the same as being there in person. I know there is no in-person experience in such services. But for now they are serving the purpose for which we are, we are happy, because of the prevailing circumstances...

The only thing is that one important aspect of church attendance is this idea of service: being able to participate, to take part...And also the very fact that we miss that fellowship, that we usually have after service, which tends to bring us together and everything. That is absent. And whether we are actually having two communities – one with online service – that is very difficult to, for us to, to define.

Nancy [5:51] I often, like I, I try and invite a lot of my friends to church and it, it just can, it can be difficult just to kind of pluck yourself up on a Sunday, and go to a place you’ve never been to, with people you’ve never met. But I’ve kind of told them that we’re doing it via Zoom, and you can join, and you don’t have to show your face, you don’t have to show your name. You can just join in and listen. And I think

I've spotted once or twice some phone numbers that I recognize...I like that aspect of it, where somebody who potentially is like a, you know, a new believer, or just curious, can just listen in when, when they feel like it.

Lia [6:26] *[Question:] How have the online services re-shaped how you understand 'worship'?*

Ade [6:33] I think in terms of re-shaping the way we worship, I think the, the initial restriction [i.e., 40 minutes on free Zoom accounts] allows me as a lay preacher to focus more on what I intend to share. I'm thinking about: 'How do I actually put this together, within the restricted time, and at the same time to communicate?' Because I mean it's all about imparting something to, to my listeners. So how do I bring this together, within the shortened period, in order for it to serve the same purpose, even if I had one hour, fifteen minutes? So it, it brings a lot of thinking into: 'How do I deliver the service on the Sunday?'

David [7:25] As Methodists, we love to sing, ok...And the very fact that I am not experiencing that when we come into these Zoom services, because we tend to sing offline. We tend to sing out of tune from each other. If only we had an effective way of getting us to sing together, with good accompaniment to the music. That would help to enrich our worship. This is the downside I am finding in these Zoom services...

We can give a very good sermon. We can do everything else. But when it comes to backing it up with very good singing, we tend to falter. And that I find extremely disappointing.

On Communion

David [8:05] Communion...The sharing of the bread and the wine. That's something I am missing...

Well we, we don't have it, and I am really, really missing that. They could have come up with a device. Find a way to, to have communion, somehow. Distanced communion.

Janet [8:20] I think the sacrament is very critical

Jonathan [8:24] What is it about the sacrament that you particularly miss? Why is it important?

Zarinna [8:30] I think that when we do it, it's the words that we say. It's the remembering of it. It's doing it together as a community. It's the praying.

- Janet [8:41] For me, it's about revisiting, every time, you know, Jesus with his disciples saying, 'This is my body and this is my blood', you know, and I think that you can say the words, but without me then being able to eat that body, and drink that blood, you know, for me sometimes the words then becomes – It doesn't hold as [much] meaning for me.
- Ade [9:05] And for me, whether it's the, the churches that have communion every week – or, in our case, that we have it once a month – it's about the renewing of the minds. I mean, there is a commitment, when you are about to receive communion, for you to reflect. And then, because you think that you are going up to receive the body and the, the blood of Christ – to sustain me for the, for the rest of the month, because we do it monthly. If it was for the week, you know, there is that renewing of the mind every week. So, either way – whether it's a month, whether it's a week but I do miss it.
- Jonathan [9:48] About communion. I mean, the reason, the issue was brought to [Methodist] Conference a couple years ago, I think it was, about whether online communion would be allowed, and they said, 'No.' And the reason given was because of issues about church order...
- I mean it comes from a history of, I think, you know, a history in which people had kind of superstitious views about the bread and the wine and, and would keep it and use it for witchcraft and other sort of magical things like that, where people misused the bread and wine, the elements of communion. But, but historically, Methodism has always said that where there are times of deprivation – where people are not able to receive communion because there aren't enough ministers in a particular context – then lay people can get a special license to do communion.
- Now, there's a range of views about communion with those who have sort of high views about it which really hate that. But it recognizes the breadth of theological understanding within the Methodism that, that in some circumstances, that's okay, and that's okay. Because, you know, there's a breadth of opinion.
- So, I don't understand why in this situation – in this context in which we are being deprived of communion – we cannot do it in an online environment. And it seems to me, as well, that it, it limits the power of God to be present in that, in the bread and wine in your home, just as God is present in the bread and wine in my home, when I'm saying the prayer.
- Janet [11:20] For me, this is an opportunity to try and, you know, re, reset things, and maybe bring other people in who probably think very

differently, you know, to reinvigorate the Church, to renew the Church, to refresh it.

Ade [11:36] I just want to ask a question of, of Lia. What happens in your [Anglican] church?

Lia [11:43] What happens in my church – which I think is quite standard for, for the Church of England at the moment – is that the priest, who is doing the, the live-streamed service, will, will say the Eucharistic prayer and take communion, and we all watch. So, we aren't sitting around, in front of our screens, with bread and, and wine. We, we just, we say the 'Amen' as part of the Eucharistic prayer. We say, we say the prayer together. We say the Lord's Prayer. And it's the priest who is the one taking communion...

So my understanding is that's actually quite Mediaeval, as well. So, back in the day, it was only the priest who, who took communion.

Janet [12:24] Oh, dear...I'm not sure which one is better: watching the priest take the communion, or not.

Ade [12:33] With regards to this new way of worship, the issue of communion maybe wasn't in the planning as such when [the Methodist Church, central office] were putting together all this guidance. That's the way it feels to me.

Lia [12:51] *If communion were possible during the pandemic, through, through Zoom, through online, and you were able to take communion virtually, how would that change your experience of worship right now?*

Ade [13:06] Even if it's only Jonathan that is actually taking it. But there is that feeling that communion is held. Right now, for how many months, we haven't had communion. That, it's as simple as that. We haven't, in any form or shape. We haven't. And in the Church of England, they have.

Janet [13:25] I agree with Ade...You know, maybe re-looking at that...We put it on. This, today, is communion. So bring your, bring your piece of bread. I mean I don't, even if I don't have bread, I can have a little piece of cream crackers or something, you know, something that I could eat, you know, and, and a glass of water. It doesn't have to be wine that I could drink. But something that would mean for me... Representation of the words that I've been speaking. And that we are having a communal experience, you know, rather than maybe nothing at all, or maybe watching the priest eat and drink while the rest of us watch.

Ade [14:02] We do have bread in our house, you know. We all have bread in our houses.

Janet [14:06] For yourself. I have cream crackers.

David [14:11] And the minister, the minister can easily bless that bread. And then all of us can then partake and eat of it.

Jonathan [14:18] There's two things that you have to do in a communion. I don't have to, we don't have to use all of the stuff in the Methodist Worship Book, in the Methodist Church. There's two things we have to do, though, which are, yeah, 'We break this bread, in remembrance of Him', and 'We drink this wine, in remembrance of Him'.

And the other thing is, when I say the prayer, 'Send down your Holy Spirit, that these gifts of bread and wine may be to us the body and blood of Christ' – And I normally do that with my hands, pointing towards the bread and the wine...

But I don't understand why I can't say that prayer over the bread and the wine that is with me, and be also praying about the bread and the wine that is in your home...The Holy Spirit is perfectly capable of getting to you that way. Why, why, you know, Jesus walked through walls, for goodness' sake, after his resurrection. So why can't the Holy Spirit be present in each of your –

And invite each of you to just put your hands, you know, over the bread and the wine and bless it. As I bless it, you bless it too. I can't see any problem with that, whatsoever.

It seems if anything to be limiting God's power and presence. But that's just my thought about it.

But if it were to happen – if you were to drink some kind of wine – it would have to be 'of the grape'. Grape juice, of some kind. That's all. And, and some, some kind of bread. But apart from that.

Janet [15:45] I mean that's a limitation. Not many people have grape, grape, a grape thing of some kind, and want to go and buy a grape thing of some kind, just to have a little bit of it.

Jonathan [15:55] No, indeed. But I mean if you just want to go out and buy a small carton of grape juice, it's going to last you for a year, isn't it... But you don't need the wine. You could just have the bread.

Jemima [16:05] I didn't think it would have been a problem. So when they said we couldn't have communion, that was a, that was a shock to me, too. But I, I was just sitting here, thinking, 'Why?'...Was it

because the, the bread that you're breaking, Jonathan, that, that we have to take from that bread? Is that, is that, was that part of the problem as well?

Jonathan [16:25] Possibly. I'm not entirely sure. But I think it's also kind of concern that goes back in history about what people do with the bread and the wine. And that sort of history of people using it for superstitious things.

Jemima [16:38] It is what it is. But it is a shame that we can't do it in our own homes, if we have the bread and wine. That's the only thing why I'm a bit confused. If we have it, why can't we do it?

Lia [16:50] *We hope for the day, and hopefully sooner rather than later, when actually we can gather together in church buildings again, we can worship in community. How do you think you will take this experience of lockdown worship back into community life at Kilburn Methodist Church?*

Zarina [17:09] I think one thing that we can think about is still trying to engage those who aren't able to come to church, or maybe go back to church.

Janet [17:23] We stream the services or, and allow them to, to participate virtually.

Ade [17:32] I think the online services will need to continue for a while, while some, some people would attend, some of us will still be following [online]. I don't know whether it's going to be Zoom or something else. But at least we will have the online services.

And then Janet said that MacKenzie's joining from Walthamstow. So somebody like that, you don't want to lose them, because they're joining every Sunday. So if we're still having any of the online services, those people that are joining now, because of distance – and even some of Nancy's friends that have joined – we, we just don't want to lose all those people, as well. So, I think we will still have to still continue with some kind of online services.

4. Postlude

Shortly after this conversation, the leaders decided to hold an online 'Love Feast'. This Methodist tradition, which dates to John Wesley's time, is a fellowship meal that recalls the ministry of Jesus and the meals he shared with disciples. As an act of worship, the Methodist Love Feast includes a time of testimony, and the sharing

of the 'Love Feast Cake' and the 'Loving Cup'. The service expresses the belonging of the body of Christ.

With regard to communion, the 2020 Methodist Conference discussed how churches could respond pastorally in light of the pandemic. Further, evolving information can be found here:

<https://www.methodist.org.uk/our-faith/reflecting-on-faith/faith-and-order/holy-communion-responding-pastorally-in-the-light-of-covid-19/>

Kilburn Methodist Church continues to meet, online, each Sunday morning.