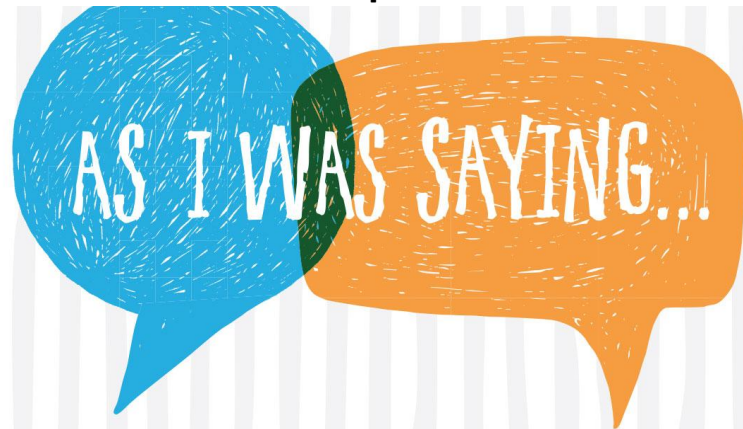


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## COVID is Devastating, but Decentralized Worship is a Gift



APRIL 17, 2020 | COLUMNS, AS I WAS SAYING, COVID-19, ONLINE EXTRAS | CORY B WILLSON

*As I Was Saying is a forum for a variety of perspectives to foster faith-related conversations among our readers with the goal of mutual learning, even in disagreement. Apart from articles written by editorial staff, these perspectives do not necessarily reflect the views of The Banner.*

What does it look like to engage in Sunday worship during a pandemic? What are we to do when our regular structures of corporate worship have been upended and public gatherings are prohibited? Without diminishing the devastating effects of this contagious disease, this present experience of decentralized worship can be a gift to the church.

The rapid spread of this new strain of coronavirus has dismantled each of our daily routines and profoundly altered our normal practices of corporate worship. Church leaders are working tirelessly to figure out how to best serve their church communities during this time. Let's be clear: no pastor was trained for this situation. We are all navigating a crisis of this proportion for the first time.

Amidst these discussions, we need to pause and reflect theologically on the role corporate worship plays in the life and mission of the church. I realize this is difficult to ask when church leaders don't have the emotional bandwidth or time for heady reflection. But a brief pause to reflect on our disrupted routines can provide inspiration to church leaders during this time. It might also offer guidance to Christians searching for new ways to engage in Sunday worship.

### **Wisdom from Latin America**

While a pandemic of this magnitude is unprecedented, the experience of decentralized corporate worship is not new in church history. There have been many moments throughout history in which gathering together in large groups for public worship was not possible (see, for example, the CICW web resource "[Pandemics and Public Worship Throughout History](#)").

One historical source of wisdom I have found is the 1960s-70s Christian movement in Latin America called Base Ecclesial Communities (BEC's). I learned of this movement via the late missionary theologian, Lesslie Newbigin (*Sign of the Kingdom*, 1981). This movement was not led by clergy but rather arose from ordinary men and women. The BEC's consisted of groups of Christians banded together for discipleship and fellowship in small communities during times of political unrest, injustice and suffering of the masses.

There are two elements of BEC's that I believe can inspire creative thinking about corporate worship. **First, during a time of decentralized discipleship, the BEC's excelled at cultivating the priesthood of all believers.** Prayer, Scripture, and sacraments no longer rested in the hands of professional clergy alone—in the BEC's all Christians were empowered to live into their privileges as part of their priesthood in Christ (1 Peter 2:9; 2 Cor. 5:17-21). **Second, the BEC's reconfigured discipleship around a fresh vision of place and parish.** Because the geographic location of the church was no longer the sole center of the church building, each person came to see their particular workplace and neighborhood as their "parish." Instead of leaving behind one's neighbors and colleagues to attend a

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During our present moment of social upheaval and geographic confinement there is much to grieve and many pastoral care needs to focus on. But what can get lost during this time is the need to cultivate the priesthood of believers for faithful presence in their parishes. This needs to be an abiding focus in our discussions about corporate worship and discipleship.

### **Decentralized Worship That Cultivates the Priesthood of All Believers**

While the gathering of bodies together in one place for corporate worship is severely impacted during this pandemic, the worshipping life of the church is still very public—perhaps even more public than it has ever been (consider how many more sermons and worship services have been livestreamed or uploaded to YouTube in the past few weeks). What I want to help church leaders consider is how they might implement practices of public worship that equips all Christians for their priestly mission in the world. Here are a few questions the BEC's invite us to consider.

- » **Does your approach to corporate worship mitigate against a spectator approach to worship?** Let's be honest, the way our society trains people to engage their screens is primarily to be consumers and spectator audiences. The full, conscious, and active participation of Christians in worship was difficult to achieve before COVID. We need to help those we serve learn new habits as they interact with online worship services and resources. Scripture, preaching, prayer, and the Lord's Supper remain foundational elements of corporate worship. But if the lion's share of a pastor's time and energy is still focused on Sunday worship, they might be missing out on a *kairos* moment in the life of the congregation. The role of a pastor, liturgist, or worship leader should focus on empowering and equipping households and small groups to take up leadership in their weekly practices of worship.
- » **How might corporate worship lead those you serve to lean into their new parish reality?** What types of worship practices might help Christians reflect on the specific people and physical spaces that they are engaging—in body and online—on a daily basis? It might seem painfully obvious, but we are all being forced to live much more locally and virtually *at the same time*. We need to help Christians orient to their new parish communities they find themselves in virtually and geographically. Church leaders need wisdom and grace as they serve “at-risk populations,” including the elderly and those with compromised immune systems. The priesthood is an irrevocable gift that isn't limited to the youthful and fit. Church leaders are servants to these priests, each one has a unique role to play in God's mission.
- » **Does corporate worship create space for people to attune to the praises, laments, confessions, and petitions from this past week? Does corporate worship invite every person in the congregation to offer up their priestly intercessions for their family, neighborhood, and work community?** Many Christians feel that Sunday morning is mainly a time to receive and hear from God. They have this nagging feeling that focusing on the week past or ahead is a distraction to genuine worship. Instead of seeing the joys and sorrows of the week as distractions to hearing from God, they can be a path of forming us to live all of life as followers of Jesus. The Psalms are a rich resource to help Christians enfold these daily realities into prayer and worship.

### **Two Examples from Easter Sunday**

No two contexts or communities are the same. Yet creative inspiration can be found through specific examples of public worship which build up the priesthood of all believers. Here are two stories that encourage active participation of the priesthood of all believers in corporate worship.

This past week at Redemption Church in Tempe, Ariz., part of Sunday worship included an interview with a congregant who works as a physician assistant. This livestream conversation allowed the congregation to hear the testimony of someone working at the frontlines of the epidemic.

“What does it feel like to inhabit this specific workplace parish amidst this crisis? What are the stresses and challenges? Where are those places where God's presence (or hiddenness) is felt?” The congregation was then invited to intercede, lament, and praise God based on what they learned through the testimony of this person.

The time of worship also included a congregational responsive prayer for medical professionals working in their city, country, and world. The gathering online equips the community for a decentralized mission. At Redemption Tempe, each person is empowered to be more aware and engaged in what they see as their new parish.

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supper, and prayer. Space is made for each person to offer up their priestly offering on behalf of their everyday parish. Home groups took turns crafting these priestly offerings into the “prayers of the people.” A creative writer or gifted speaker from the house group recorded this prayer, and it will be shared with the rest of the church on the following Sunday. The decentralized small group structure allows for deeper connections to be made between Scripture and prayer and each person’s parish.

### **A Sanctified Imagination in Anxious Times**

Many felt the loss of their favorite liturgies and services during Holy Week last week. And more than a few church staff are feeling the weight of crafting meaningful worship services for streaming. As we all—church leaders and congregants alike—struggle to find new rhythms of life and worship, there are a few practical ways we can lean into God in this historical moment.

The liturgical movement through Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday can form us all year long. Each week as you prepare for corporate worship, be alert to the Good Friday suffering you see or experience around you. Perhaps it was a FaceTime call with a friend who is sick or hurting that lingers in your mind. Or it may be a Holy Saturday experience of the silence of God that a neighbor is facing in their social isolation has deepened their struggle with depression. All of these realities of suffering, silence, and hurt need to be brought to God in prayer and Scripture. As we do this, we begin to long for God’s Easter resurrection power to break into these places of our world. As we embrace the groaning of people and communities around us, we become attuned to the groaning of the Holy Spirit and the resurrection power of Jesus. When we carry these offerings to God in prayer, we are formed into the royal priesthood God commissioned us to be.

There is no shortage of prophets today—some predicting doom and others optimism. In such anxious times it is helpful to listen to the testimonies of those faithful who have gone before us. Many are eager and hopeful that this wave of isolation and illness will pass quickly and that life will return to normal.

In light of the wisdom and witness of the BEC’s, we should ask ourselves these questions: How might my leadership of or participation in corporate worship need to shift to build up the priesthood of all believers? What new gifts might God give when we can come together again as a community of priests and raise our hands—shoulder to shoulder—on Sunday again? By God’s grace, this time of decentralized public worship can bring about a fuller experience of the priesthood of all believers.

## **About the Author**

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