

ONtrac

On TRAC Together for God's Word, Worship, Welcome, Witness and Wonder



MARCH 2021



TRAC in a time of COVID-19



A WORD
FROM YOUR
PASTOR

Staying OnTRAC for Christ during Covid-19

I would like to thank TRAC President Rev Stanley Chua for the privilege of contributing this introduction to the 2021 issue of OnTRAC. I also wish to thank the many different writers who have contributed articles over the years. The reading of their thoughts and ideas has been edifying and stimulating (and can still be accessed from our TRAC website). The articles in this issue are no exception. Indeed, they may seem to be of even more immediate relevance to the current COVID-19 pandemic that is affecting everyone everywhere. The writers reflect on how the Church might respond to some of the many different challenges presented to us all by the pandemic.

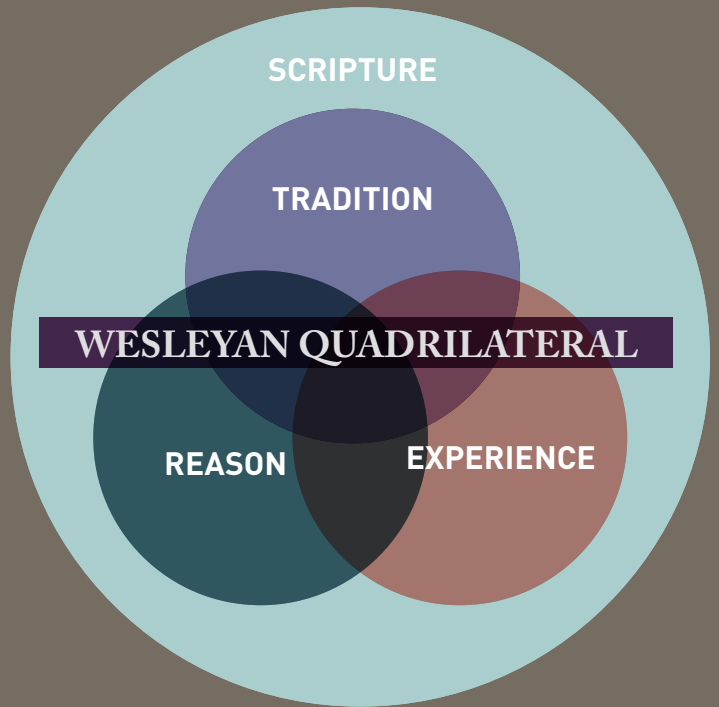
Since all the writers are Methodist members of TRAC, they have been asked to keep their reflections OnTRAC(k) with aspects of Christian discipleship promoted in TRAC.

There is an article reflecting on how, in these COVID-19 days, we might continue to promote each of the 5W's (Word, Worship, Welcome, Witness, Wonder) of the Christian discipleship journey. In addition, there are articles which discuss how the practice of the Wesleyan quadrilateral (Scripture, Reason, Tradition, Experience) and the ancient concept of Rules of Life might be edifying for us all during these days of the pandemic.

Whilst the reflections recorded in these articles do not necessarily represent the official position of The Methodist Church in Singapore, I hope that you will be as edified and encouraged as I was in the reading of them. May this issue help us all stay OnTRAC Together in experiencing and promoting God's Word, Worship, Welcome, Witness & Wonder in these COVID-19 days.

Amen.

COVID-19 Through the Wesleyan Quadrilateral



INTRODUCTION

2020 would probably be the year that many in our generation will remember for a long time to come, as the world responds to a virus that not only caught the attention of the world, but also affected it. With the wide-spread impact on the world socially, economically, and medically, and the large numbers of infections and fatality rates, one word that was commonly used to describe the COVID-19 pandemic was 'unprecedented'. This, plus the fact that there are some who claim that this pandemic marks the end times, may leave some of us confused and wondering what we can make of this pandemic and how we are to respond to it.

WHAT IS THE WESLEYAN QUADRILATERAL?

The Wesleyan Quadrilateral can be summarised to be a rubric through which we are able to construct an understanding

of God, His nature, His actions and the world He created¹. As the name suggests, the quadrilateral consist of four components, namely (1) Scripture – the Bible; (2) Reason – rationality and logic; (3) Tradition – customs, practices and actions, and beliefs; and (4) Experience – understanding and skills acquired through events, which forms four bulwarks that act as boundaries to guide our theological reflection of the world around us.²

Any hypothesis or thought must make sense in the light of all four 'lenses' before they should be reasonably accepted, which means that something that clears one lens and yet contradicts one or all the other lenes should not be considered.

Nevertheless, Scripture is the centrepiece and the most important component in the quadrilateral onto which the other ones hang on.

SCRIPTURE

Scripture is the primary source through which God revealed himself to mankind. It reveals the nature of God through His actions and words, as experienced by mankind. It captures both the divine communication (God's revealed words spoken to man in the Gospels, the testimonies of believers and their thoughts throughout history in the Epistles), and God's divine interaction with mankind throughout historical narratives.

The Bible is a good place to start when asking: why did this pandemic happen, and perhaps more broadly, why is there suffering, disease and sickness in this world?

Genesis 1:26 uses "image" to mean a replica, which in turn has the nuance of being a representation as well as a modelling after the pattern of someone. The word "dominion" in the same verse has the idea of extending sovereignty over. In other words, this verse tells us that humanity has been placed on earth by God to serve as His deputy on earth and to exercise sovereignty and control over the world. This is reinforced in Gen 1:29 to note that creation

has been handed over to man and that man is in charge.

HOWEVER, WITH THE FALL OF MAN, WHAT WAS HANDED OVER TO MAN – NATURE – LIKewise WAS CURSED TOGETHER WITH MAN. THUS, WE READ IN GENESIS 3:17 "... CURSED IS THE GROUND BECAUSE OF YOU..." (GENESIS 3:17, ESV).

The effects of the fall extends beyond humans to ecology and creation. Therefore, one should not be surprised that viruses and other microbes (including coronaviruses), being part of nature, are also fallen and thus, virulent. By extension, we should therefore not be surprised that there is suffering, disease and sickness in this world, because of the fallenness of nature and the world.

However, the same lens that brings us the reason for our condemnation also brings us hope, for in the Bible we read not just of the fall, but also the restoration. Isaiah 65:17-18 tells us that a new heaven and earth shall come, while Isaiah 65:25 which speaks of the restoration of nature and ecology, offers us hope even in times like today, amid the pandemic.

REASON

While Scripture remains the cornerstone of our theological reflection of the pandemic, John Wesley asserts that it should not read and applied frivolously, but with reason and logic. In fact, he goes so far as to proclaim that "[i]t is a fundamental principle with us [the Methodists], that to renounce reason is to renounce religion, that religion and reason go hand in hand, and that all irrational religion is false religion."³

Jesus told the disciples that they have ability to "cure diseases" and to "heal the

sick" (Luke 9:1-2) and commended the shrewd manager who used the ways of the world wisely (Luke 16:8-9). In the former, we read about how we are given authority over diseases and in the latter, we read about using the instruments of the world to forward good cause. Jesus was commending the manager not so much for his dishonesty but for using the instruments available to him to forward his course.

I believe that God has given us the authority and ability to overcome most diseases and heal the sick. This takes the form of

medical technology and advancement, which have brought global life expectancy up from 60.23 years old in 1950 to 83.39 years old in 2020.⁴ The ability to reason and come up with these technological advances come by the grace of God, as part of the restoration God is working.

Returning to the current pandemic, by the grace of God we do know much about the virus. The fact that the virus is not airborne, needs a host to spread, does not stay lethal outside a host for extended period and can be denatured with alcohol tells us that this virus can be controlled and stopped, and that we should all exercise reasonable care to develop medical treatments, follow control measures, and prevent this

pandemic from going out of hand. In other words, God has gifted us with the ability to reason, think logically, and cumulate 'scientific knowledge' which provides essential information of the world around us, including virology. As with all the other gifts from God, this should be embraced to help us deal with the pandemic.

By means of reason, we know that this pandemic can be controlled, and it is not to be seen as the judgement of God upon mankind, for the very fact that it can be stopped and reversed (and perhaps by the time this article is published, a vaccine is developed), speaks of the grace and mercy of God.

TRADITION

The third lens of the quadrilateral may be useful as we look at some of the principles and beliefs from our heritage. By drawing on tradition to deal with the situations we face, we draw from the collective thought and constant refining of the many giants in the faith. The tradition and cumulation of thought and debate come to us in the form of creeds⁵, our hymn books⁶, commentaries and writings of the early church fathers, our rituals⁷ and even our Book of Discipline, which contains the articles of faith, our polity, our social principles and our social creed.

Specific to the pandemic and how we can respond, the social principles in the Book of Discipline of the Methodist Church in Singapore gives us the most immediate application, for it reminds us that "[t]he Methodist Church must view the perplexing times and problems we face today in the light of the life and teaching of Jesus [who] teaches us to love our neighbours ...".⁸ It goes on to remind us that "... each person has a special gift or talent which

can be used for the development of a compassionate society"⁹ and goes on to affirm specifically the need to care for the poor, through our social concerns program to help those in the societies who are struggling to make a living and make ends meet, especially during the pandemic. Additionally, our Social Principles remind us of the need to be involved in the provision of health care, affirming God's sovereignty in healing through our medical resources and healthcare workers – including our members who are doctors, nurses and other frontline workers.¹⁰ These principles are neither new nor unique to the Methodists, for during the 14th century Bubonic plague, Christian nuns likewise embraced Jesus' command to us to love our neighbours and thereby "tended the sick with all sweetness and humility".¹¹

This is our Biblically mandated response in times of crisis, as demonstrated by those before us, and is our tradition. It remains relevant for us in the COVID-19 pandemic

and other further pandemics.

EXPERIENCE

Finally, John Wesley was very aware that the world includes not only the rational but also the empirical. It is the power to observe, experience something, and organize experience for experimental purposes, that makes something connect for us and make it truly real. In other words, to experience something can perhaps be the final piece that connects the virtual and reality, the theoretical and the practical, the mind and the heart and many times, the component that when activated, forces us to rethink the

rest of the components because of the inherently more dominant and persistent nature.

Specific to the pandemic, the fact that God answered our prayer by healing those in our churches who were infected by the virus, continually led our churches in the various phases of preparation to ensure we can continue to experience God and worship online, and continued to keep the fatality rate in Singapore so low are experiences that reinforce our understanding that God continues to be in control and is real, leading and guiding us even in times like this.

CONCLUSION

I started of this article by saying that the perception is that COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented situation and on some aspects it is. Through the theological framework of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, we have an objective understanding of the pandemic and how we may respond to it objectively, realising that God is still very much in control of our

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- Methodist Church of Singapore. *Book of Discipline*. Methodist Church of Singapore, 2006.
- . *Book of Discipline*. Methodist Church of Singapore, 2017.

Endnotes

- ¹ Stanley Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 121.
- ² Thomas C. Oden, *John Wesley's Teachings, Volume 1: God and Providence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 93.
- ³ Joseph E. Coleson, ed., *Treasure the Word: A Layperson's Guide to Interpreting Scripture*, Wesleyan theological perspectives (Indianapolis, Ind: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2009), 49.
- ⁴ United Nations Population Division., *Life Expectancy at Birth, Total (Years)*, n.d., accessed August 7, 2020, <http://data.un.org/Search.aspx?q=life+expectancy>.
- ⁵ Which encapsulates our central beliefs in a succinct manner, with economy of words.
- ⁶ Our theology in songs.
- ⁷ Theology expressed through actions.
- ⁸ Methodist Church of Singapore, *Book of Discipline* (Methodist Church of Singapore, 2006), 34.
- ⁹ Methodist Church of Singapore, *Book of Discipline* (Methodist Church of Singapore, 2017).
- ¹⁰ *Ibid*.
- ¹¹ Mark Galli, "When a Third of the World Died," *Christian History Magazine Everyday Faith in the Middle Ages*, no. 49, Christianity Today (1996).

Rule of *Life*



“WFH” (work from home) is probably something most of us are familiar with. I am not referring only to the acronym, which has come to be part of our common parlance, but also the fact that it has come to describe a typical day for many of us.

Seen previously as an ideal work arrangement, the realities of WFH struck us hard when we realised that many of us have traded the comfort of working in our home clothes for a blurring of lines between our work and personal lives. Not only that, but much of our routine were also disrupted as we made adjustments to the “new normal”.

DISRUPTIONS: A PART OF LIFE

Unsurprisingly, some adapted to the disruption better than others while some could not. The effects of sharing a limited space with others, even loved ones, began to take its toll on even the most patient of us.

In some ways, disruptions are probably not unfamiliar for us. When the train breaks down, for example, it disrupts our commute and travel plans. But the pandemic of 2020 may be the biggest disruption yet. As with all disruptions, we long for a return to the norm; we hope to develop a new routine, because routine, as binding as it may sound, offers us comfort. It is in

routine that we find predictability and a sense of security.

But if there is something that the pandemic has taught us, it is that the routines we so painstakingly developed over time are easily disrupted. How then, should we respond to an ever-changing world?

DISRUPTIONS AND A RULE OF LIFE

There is a practice of spiritual formation within the Christian faith called “Developing a Rule of Life” that I believe offers us a handle on dealing with an everchanging environment.

The word “rule” may conjure up images of regulations and restrictions. But the Latin word we translate “rule” was originally the word for a trellis in a vineyard. Just as a vine requires the trellis to lift it off the ground, we too need a rule as a support structure around which we organise our lives.¹

A rule of life is a dynamic set of practices and schedules that helps punctuate our lives with a sort of sacred rhythm. It is “an exterior framework for an interior journey”; a structure around which we intentionally build our lives to keep God at the centre of it all.² A rule of life helps us create space in our busy world where the lines between work, rest, and relationships are increasingly blurred. And it is in these

spaces of time set aside to be with Jesus, staying centred on him, that we allow ourselves to become like our Saviour. It is these times of centring that we find perspective and clarity to the way of life to which God has called us.⁴

Contrary to what we may think, a rule of life is not about setting in place a rigid schedule or routine. Instead, the purpose of a rule is to lay down working guidelines for our inner life, and to provide a framework for the balanced ordering of work, leisure, and social relationships.

HOW DO WE DEVELOP A RULE OF LIFE?

First, remember that each of us is unique. That means that there is no one “rule” to... rule them all. Your rule of life will look quite different from mine, and rightly so! Take time to explore and understand yourself better by asking yourself questions such as “what kinds of spiritual practices bring you closer to God? Which drive you away from him?”

Second, be realistic. Consider working on one or two elements or areas (listed

below) in your life that the Lord is leading you to work on. It is better to take small, sustainable steps than be overly ambitious and give up because it is too difficult to maintain.

Third, be mindful not to turn the rule into legalism. A rule is better understood as a way of life, not as a list of rules to be kept. It is, in large part, a means to an end – the end being that we might seek God with authenticity and live more effectively for Him.⁵

Next, consider which area(s) you would like to work on first. Note well, however, that a holistic and balanced life takes all these areas into account because we are embodied beings with body, mind, and soul. Thus, an intentional rule of life must incorporate elements pertaining to our physical, social, and spiritual well-being.

Creating and living by a rule of life may not come easily for everyone. But in a busy, fragmented and everchanging world, it is a helpful, time-honoured resource for wise living.



WHAT FOLLOWS ARE SOME AREAS AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO HELP YOU BEGIN DEVELOPING A RULE OF LIFE FOR YOURSELF.⁶

MIND – Our thought life affects the kind of person we become. Pay attention to what we are feeding our minds by guarding the time and things that we allow ourselves to read and/or watch. Consider committing to disengage from screens on a daily, weekly, and annual basis. Consider also committing to a regular intake of truth and teaching through reading, listening to podcasts, etc. and the daily habit of gratitude and hope.

BODY – We are familiar with Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 6 that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. Take time to consider how we have attempted to keep our whole person healthy and whole before God. Perhaps you might want to begin by committing to sleep a minimum of 7 hours a night, exercising regularly, eating well or even visiting the dentists every 6 months, and undergoing a comprehensive medical check-up annually.

RELATIONSHIPS – We are relational beings, created for relationships. Reflect on what we have been doing to create, nurture and deepen relationships with our friends, colleagues, cell group members, and family members. Consider committing to a weekly meal with your community and some daily or weekly touchpoints with your spouse and children or other family members, and/or closest friends.

REST – Rest is an essential part of spiritual formation and living well in God’s world. Think about the rhythms of rest currently built into your life on a daily, weekly, monthly and even annual basis. What new practices would you like to change? Consider introducing a weekly “stay in and do nothing evening” (And be sure not to turn that into a time to catch up on the housework!)

WORK & MONEY – In God’s grand design, work was meant to be fulfilling. Unfortunately, work-life balance has come to be something that many dream about or strive to achieve. Also, our work often generates money, and how we steward those resources is key to our apprenticeship to Jesus. Consider the current habits in our work and financial life and the changes we ought to make so our work and money may be part of our life before God. Consider the way we spend our money on a daily basis and explore other avenues of giving or undertake other forms of work that builds others up.

SERVICE & ACTS OF MERCY – We have a mandate to make disciples of all nations, and to continue the mission of caring for the poor, healing the sick, etc that Jesus began. Consider undertaking a weekly or monthly form of service or act of mercy that would challenge us to go beyond our usual circles and put our faith to work.

Endnotes

¹ Practicing the Way, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5852ec829f7456cfcc0e1c5a/t/5e17be5d7cba366ace1df6e1/1578614383140/ptw_ruleoflife_workbook_.pdf

² <https://www.emotionallyhealthy.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Session-8-Go-the-Next-Step-to-Develop-a-Rule-of-Life.pdf>

³ <https://www.northumbriacommunity.org/who-we-are/our-rule-of-life/what-is-a-rule-of-life/>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Practicing the Way, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5852ec829f7456cfcc0e1c5a/t/5e17be5d7cba366ace1df6e1/1578614383140/ptw_ruleoflife_workbook_.pdf

Holy Communion in COVID-19



“Pastor, since we cannot take Holy Communion in church, can I take it on my own at home?”

We used to celebrate Holy Communion without having to ask or even think about questions like this, but the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted our worship practice norms and brought about a situation in which such questions have arisen.

Many of these questions are sparked by practical considerations, but our answers to them have profound implications on what of our faith we pass on. Our answers reflect our beliefs about Holy Communion. As such, perhaps COVID-19 will turn out for the church’s edification a recovery of the significance of Holy Communion in the life and witness of the church, through such questioning and reflection. Rather than present a detailed reflection on the

questions and issues raised, this article seeks to impress upon us the weightiness of the sacrament of Holy Communion, to seek Christ in it, to avoid any tendency to trivialise it, and to treasure every opportunity availed to us for it.

1. WHAT IS HOLY COMMUNION?

Holy Communion is one of the two Sacraments (the other being Baptism) instituted by Jesus Christ for his followers. Holy Communion, like Baptism, is commanded (ordained) by Jesus for his disciples to do. Its practice is “passed on” from the first disciples of Jesus to subsequent generations through the Church. (Lk 22:19; 1 Cor 11:23-24)

Holy Communion is a corporate meal shared by Christians. The significance of this sacrament can be understood by the various names that it is called today:

a) **“The Lord’s Supper”** informs us that this is the meal that the Lord Jesus used to explain to his disciples the significance of his death on its eve. It is also the meal in which Jesus is recognised by his disciples when he appeared to them after his resurrection. Finally, it is also the meal which anticipates Jesus’ return and the heavenly banquet in which all Christians will feast with him in. Jesus commanded his disciples to eat this meal “in remembrance” of him.

b) **“The Eucharist”** is literally “the Thanksgiving.” The meal is a celebration of thanksgiving to God for his manifold blessings and salvation, most of all in his giving of his Son, Jesus, for our redemption, reconciliation, and sanctification.

c) **“Holy Communion”** enlightens us to the reality of Jesus’ presence being and relating with us as the “crucified and risen Lord,” and our reception of his works of healing, forgiveness, and the restoration of wholeness and peace into our lives. Furthermore, in Holy Communion, we are called by Jesus into a true communion with him that must translate into our communion with others who are also in communion with him.

Holy Communion is not merely the consumption of a special food and drink. It is the gathering of the community of believers at Christ’s invitation, around a common table, and the re-presentation of specific sign-actions of Christ – aspects which all come together as a whole to make known the mystery of the gospel of Christ.

2. WHAT IS A “SACRAMENT”?

Sacraments are “signs of grace” – acts through which we especially recognise and know “God’s good will toward us”, and by which our faith in God is “strengthened and confirmed”.

We only recognise baptism and Holy Communion as sacraments because they are explicitly commanded by Christ in Scripture.

From the Church’s infancy, special care is called for regarding the conduct of the Sacrament of Holy Communion. (1 Cor 11:17-34) Underlying such care is the recognition that the way the Sacrament is conducted conveys spiritual truths that are more than what words can express.

3. HOW HAVE TRAC CHURCHES RESPONDED REGARDING THE HOLY COMMUNION IN THE LIGHT OF COVID-19?

During the Circuit Breaker, as movement and contact between persons were restricted to stem the spread of the virus, the then Bishop of the Methodist Church in Singapore (MCS), Bishop Dr Chong Chin Chung, directed all MCS churches to refrain from conducting the Holy Communion, until such time when it can be celebrated again in a safe and socially responsible way.¹ The “fast” from Holy Communion was urged in a spirit of love for our neighbours, to do our part in breaking the spread of the virus.

When the Circuit Breaker was lifted in phases beginning from June, the possibility of “online Holy Communion” presented itself for consideration. While perhaps new to many in Singapore, proposals of various forms of this are not new in the wider Church. Genuine concerns were surfaced about how such modes of administering Holy Communion could impinge the integrity of the Sacrament.²

After careful deliberation, Bishop Chong issued a dispensation in June which allowed, only for the season of this pandemic, for elders to conduct a specific form of “online Holy Communion”, which maintained the need for:

- the elements to be consecrated by an elder,
- for the elements to be handled only by stewards and worshippers of the church, and
- the need for the elements to be partaken by worshippers online at a fixed time together with the rest of the church.

The intent of such a specific and strict form was to preserve the sanctity of the Sacrament, and the will of God, contained in the Sacrament, for the oneness and togetherness of the church. (1 Cor 10:17) Such a form of online Holy Communion was a dispensation only for the season of the pandemic out of a pastoral concern to not deprive Methodists of the Sacrament – it was not to be normative for the MCS beyond the pandemic.

At the time of this writing, TRAC churches have responded differently to the situation. Some have adopted such a form of online Holy Communion. The general theological impetus for this decision is a recognition of Holy Communion as the chief Sacrament through which Christ encourages and builds up his people, and a pastoral urgency to avail such a means in this time of crisis, with sufficient safeguards deemed to be provided within the Bishop's dispensation.

Other TRAC churches have opted to abide by a strictly in-person only form of Holy Communion. These generally do so out of theological prudence, recognising the distance from the ideal in conducting the Sacrament outside of a physical gathering, and desiring to help the people of God appreciate the weightiness of this Sacrament which has a real impact beyond the present on what of the Christian faith is later passed on through the church's liturgy.

Still, regarding Holy Communion, TRAC churches are paradoxically "one with each other." Despite differences in theological conclusions on the matter, TRAC pastors and leaders are keenly aware of the oneness of the body of Christ that Jesus commanded for in this sacrament. Even those who have reservations about the practice of online Holy Communion were willing to lay down their opinions and join in its partaking during the TRAC 45th Session Opening Holy Communion Service, which had to be held partially online.

4. WHAT ARE "CONSECRATED ELEMENTS"?

In Holy Communion, consecrated elements refer to the bread and "wine" that have been offered to God for sacred use and have become "for us the body and blood of Christ" as was prayed for God to make them.

In the MCS, ordained elders, or people specially authorised by the Bishop, are given the privilege and responsibility to consecrate the elements in the Holy Communion ritual.

5. IN WHAT WAY THE CONSECRATED ELEMENTS THE BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST?

Methodists do not believe that the elements become flesh and blood in substance (i.e., transubstantiation) because we do not see that idea affirmed in Scripture. We believe that the consecrated elements are a special means through which we encounter Christ's presence now and thus we can share in the body and blood of Christ. For us, "how Christ comes among us during Holy Communion is not as important as the affirmation that he does come to us." ⁴



6. WHAT SHOULD I DO WITH UNCONSUMED CONSECRATED HOLY COMMUNION ELEMENTS?

In the form of online Holy Communion as described above, the likelihood of a worshipper inadvertently missing the specified service to partake the Holy Communion and possessing unconsumed elements is increased. How we treat the unconsumed consecrated elements “should express our stewardship of God’s gifts and our respect for the holy purpose they have served.”

Where possible, they should be reverently consumed at the soonest time following the missed service, while recognising that this action is not what the church properly understands to be Holy Communion.

Where it is not feasible to consume them, the bread may be buried or scattered on soil, and the “wine” may be reverently

poured out upon soil – a biblical gesture of worship [2 Sam 23:16].⁵

The principle is ultimately about each acting in good conscience toward God, and not stumbling the faith of fellow Christians.

7. HOW SHOULD I PARTICIPATE IN HOLY COMMUNION WHEN I MUST WORSHIP FROM HOME THROUGH THE INTERNET?

- Holy Communion is an act of worship and we participate in it with sincerity, gratefulness, and reverence.
- You should have collected or received the consecrated elements from the church.
- Before the start of the online worship service, lay out the elements as you would in receiving an important guest, and where it is easily accessible for you. As an act of worship, we may see this act of preparation in the same light as hearing Jesus’ instruction to his

disciples to go ahead of him to prepare a place where he may eat with them. (Lk 22:8-13)

- Follow along in the worship service and the Holy Communion ritual.
- Follow the directions of the presiding pastor on when to take up the elements and partake them together with the rest of the church.
- At the end of the service, you may dispose of the empty packaging that held the elements.

8. WHAT IF I DO NOT HAVE THE COMMUNION ELEMENTS WITH ME WHEN I AM WORSHIPPING FROM HOME THROUGH THE INTERNET IN A SERVICE CELEBRATING THE HOLY COMMUNION?

You should still follow along in the whole worship service including the Holy Communion ritual. Although you will not be able to partake the elements, your

participation in the service and ritual continues to be in the spirit of worship.

In keeping with the significance of Holy Communion as a “breaking of the one loaf” (represented today in a sharing of the elements from a common table) it is desirable that you refrain from substituting the elements with your own bread and beverage.

Contact the church to arrange to collect or receive the elements for the next Holy Communion service so that you may together share in Holy Communion with the Lord and with the Lord’s family of believers.

Scripture and References for reflection:

Scripture: Matthew 26:17-29; Mark 14:12-25; Luke 22:7-30; 24:13-32; John 6:25-59; 13:1-30; Acts 2:42-47; 1 Corinthians 10:14-33; 11:17-34.

John Wesley’s Sermons: “The Means of Grace,” “The Duty of Constant Communion,” and “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount VI.”

The Articles of Religion of the Methodist Church (1784), Articles XIII, XVI & XVIII. (<https://www.methodist.org.sg/index.php/news-events/what-s-happening/2-uncategorised/7-the-articles-of-religion-of-the-methodist-church-1784>)

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Bishop Emeritus T.R. Doraisamy, A Methodist View of the Sacraments and Observances (Council on Christian Education, The Methodist Church in Singapore, <https://www.trac-mcs.org.sg/images/pdf/boardofministry/A%20Methodist%20View%20of%20the%20Sacraments%20and%20Observances.pdf>)

Theng Huat Leow, “Online Holy Communion and Its Symbolic Representation,” Credo, Jul 6, 2020 (Singapore: Ethos Institute for Public Christianity, https://ethosinstitute.sg/online-holy-communion/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=online-holy-communion)

Endnotes

¹ In denominations like ours, grape juice is used in place of wine out of a historical and pastoral concern to welcome recovering alcoholics to the Lord’s Table.

² “Pastoral Letter to All Methodist Brothers and Sisters,” by Bishop Dr Chong Chin Chung, Rev Dr Gregory Goh Nai Lat (President, Chinese Annual Conference), Rev James Nagulan (President, Emmanuel Tamil Annual Conference), and Rev Dr Gordon Wong (President, Trinity Annual Conference), 28 Mar 2020. (https://www.methodist.org.sg/images/2019-nCoV/Revised_Letter_from_Bishop_AC_Presidents_28_Mar_2020.pdf)

³ Church Membership Manual: The Methodist Church in Singapore, The Trinity Annual Conference of The Methodist Church in Singapore, 9th Reprint (Singapore: Armour Publishing Pte Ltd, 2017), 119.

⁴ Church Membership Manual, 114-5.

⁵ The United Methodist Book of Worship (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2012), 30.

Word in a COVID-19 World

So, why should we still bother with God's Word in this pandemic? Aren't there already enough issues for us to deal with?

THE LIVING WORD

The message of God's word still needs to be communicated in this pandemic. Its relevance to our lives is timeless, regardless of the situation. Allow me to offer 3 reasons why:

1. God is still speaking to us through His word.

The hearing of God's word is especially important today, Jeffery Truscott warns, "Sustaining obedience and faith is not easy. Life's difficulties weaken both of these. When challenged by illness, financial problems, and disappointments, we begin to doubt God's love for us - or whether there even is a God."¹

Despite the hustle and bustle of this pandemic, God has not gone mute. God is still speaking to us through a variety of means - and Scripture is one of God's primary means of expounding His word to us, revealing His will for our situations, and igniting our hearts on fire to live holy lives.

Thomas Long emphasized the importance of hearing God's word in this season with this reminder, "Preaching refreshes the memory of the people of God and announces the promise of God's future.

Preaching insists that the Christian community not curl up on the pew to rest, but continue on the journey of discipleship²... we dare to preach because we believe that Jesus Christ is already speaking to the church and to the world³."

2. God's Word offers us a voice and the words to converse with God about our predicament.

Other than offering instruction and hope in this season, God's word - such as the Psalms, offers those who struggle with finding the right words to express our feelings, with the words to pray to God about our predicament. Walter Brueggemann suggests that the Psalms can be categorised to reflect three basic movements in everyone's life: (a) being securely oriented; (b) being painfully disoriented; and (c) being surprisingly reoriented.⁴

In a season of secure orientation everything makes sense in our lives, and the Psalms that us to express our joy and affirm God's goodness. For example, Psalm 8 declares, "what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?" (Psalm 8:4, ESV)

In a season of painful disorientation one faces anguish, alienation, suffering, and death. Brueggemann encourages us to use the Psalms of disorientation to express our rage, resentment, and pain with words such

as “O LORD, why do you cast my soul away?
Why do you hide your face from me?”
(Psalm 88:14, ESV).

Finally, in a season of new orientation, we realize that God has lifted us out of our despair. Hope and joy have now broken through our dark moments. Where there was previously only darkness, there is now light. There is a sense of gratitude and awareness about our lives and our God. Psalms of new orientation, such as Psalm 30 and 65, sing about these new gifts from our sovereign God, who makes all things new.

Recognizing that different psalms can aid us in our prayer and worship in these seasons of our lives can help us find appropriate words and expressions to relate to God honestly, and with our whole heart, about our predicament.

3. The goal of discipleship has not changed, nor has it been postponed because of the pandemic.

God is still calling the entire church to proclaim the gospel and to make disciples who walk in Christlikeness. Yet spiritual formation is seldom an instantaneous experience. Robert Mulholland Jr advises, “Spiritual formation is a lifelong process of growth into the image of Christ. This gradual aspect of spiritual formation moves against the grain of instant gratification culture. Every event of life is an experience of spiritual formation. Every action taken, every response made, every dynamic of relationship, every thought held, every emotion allowed: These are the minuscule arenas where, bit by bit, infinitesimal piece by infinitesimal piece, we are shaped into a certain kind of being. We are being shaped either toward the whole of the image of Christ or toward a horribly destructive caricature of that image.”⁵

Without the guidance of the word of God that renews our minds and hearts, our poorly ordered hearts can be easily distracted and dominated by alternative passions. We need God’s word to order our hearts well to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. The word of God is necessary to help us to make sense of the world around us, relate to God personally, and grow in Christlikeness.

THE WORD IN LOCKDOWN

The pandemic has altered and influenced the current landscape in which we have employed the means of communicating God’s word.

1. Online Worship Services

Firstly, the preaching of God’s word has predominantly moved online.

Today, we are not just working from home, but also worshipping from home. Whilst several churches have resumed physical worship services, the safe distancing measures have limited the number of worshippers. The need to maintain our online worship services is more acute for churches that are unable to accommodate all their worshippers in a single weekend.

Worship services are now seldom attended in church premises, but from home at our convenience. The flexibility to decide when and where to view our online worship services will result with worshippers losing the habit of attending church regularly. The absence of people physically sitting around us during service frees us also to openly respond to our distractions - such as responding to a text message or a comment on social media.

With the transition to online services, our church services are no longer competing solely with neighbouring churches, nor

even the online worship services of popular churches in North America. Rather, the church's true competitors are the alternative forms of 'worship' or 'sermon' that really draw us such as Instagram, Ted talks, Netflix and YouTube. The loss of rhythm and participation explain why several church leaders are anticipating a decline of church attendance when physical worship services resume.

It is paramount that we consider how we may restore the discipline of hearing God's word as a church. For example, churches may consider streaming their online worship services at fixed time slots as with physical worship services, to smoothen worshippers' transition from online to physical worship.

God's Word must be studied with others so that we may discern our understanding and interpretation through the lens of our Christian community and tradition. As the safe distancing measures have an isolating effect on our community, we must intentionally find creative means to study God's word together.

For example, cell groups could commit to attending worship service together, whether online or physical services, for accountability and growing as a community. Preachers should consider providing sermon questions for cell group discussion, so that these cell groups may explore deeper into the message preached and consider how members may hold each other accountable to live out God's word in our community. This encourages the cell ministry and pulpit to work in unison to address the various discipleship essentials that the church leadership identify as necessary for nurturing the church.

2. The Small Group

Secondly, the way we study God's word in smaller group setting has been

affected. The study and living out of God's word extends beyond cell group life, as Christians sign up for various Bible study classes such as Disciple to help them deepen their understanding of God's word.

However, the number of participants in a physical Bible study group is limited by the current government advisories. Training for Bible study group leaders and facilitators must now include advice on how to use video conference tools to engage their participants in their learning, such as how to manage Zoom⁶ break-out rooms, sharing a video (with sound!), making annotations on presentations, etc.

For leaders to be able to focus on leading the class towards its learning objectives, leaders who are unfamiliar with these video conferencing tools will need to arrange for someone to volunteer as a Zoom assistant, to help them with setting up the relevant Zoom configurations for the session.

Other than learning how to use videoconferencing tools, Bible study leaders and facilitators also need to find creative means of running some aspects of their Bible study classes. For example, how we do lay hands to pray for a participant during a Zoom Bible study class? I heard of a leader who sent play dough (a form of modelling clay) to his participants' homes, prior to a particular session simply so that they could make clay jars as part of their Bible study lesson on 2 Corinthians 4:6-12.

We must also consider Christians who struggle to be connected technologically in the study of God's word. They are not necessarily those who are senior in age, but could be individuals from the visually impaired, hearing-impaired, and special needs community. As they struggle to access our sermons or attend Bible study groups online, intentional efforts need to be made to connect with them and offer a friendship that seeks God's will

together, whether it is through sharing our reflections over a phone call or making a personal visit to help them have a regular intake of God's word,

In addition, we must be reminded not to be overly reliant on Zoom. Technology is not the gospel - it is only an aid. Zoom cannot replace face-to-face connections and is unable to fully communicate the love language of touch when we pat a friend on the back. There are also people who are so tired of their corporate Zoom meetings that they would prefer a face-to-face conversation over a cup of coffee, rather than another Zoom cell group session.

3. In Private

Thirdly, due to the reduced physical interaction with the Christian community, we need to reinforce the importance of disciplined private study of God's word to be transformed into Christlikeness.

The reduced engagement with our Christian community and disruption to our rhythm of churchgoing displaces some of the regular means of reminders and encouragement for our personal spiritual growth which we would normally experience. Some of us may suddenly realise that we have been over-reliant on others to understand God's word and discern His will, that we find ourselves struggling to hear His voice on our own in this season.

We should not only emphasise the

corporate preaching and group study of God's word, but also the private study of God's word. We need a regular spiritual diet of God's Word that shapes us through the listening, reading studying and living out of His Word.

Bishop Robert Solomon writes, "Because we are shaped by God's Word, it is important that we are committed to reading it regularly so that our minds and hearts and souls are shaped by what He has revealed in it."⁷

At the same time, this is a timely opportunity for families to try out new routines for worship, prayer, and Bible study as a family. There are many age-appropriate family devotion resources available for our consideration. For families that are taking their first steps, you might want to start with (i) agreeing on a time of the day or week with your family members for the family devotion, and (ii) selecting a scripture to meditate on and share your reflections.

God continues to speak through his Word to us in this season. Our discernment of God's word for our season must come forth from having heard the word of God, faithfully reflected upon in a community who will keep us accountable. As a church, we must continually evaluate the means by which God's word is preached, studied and lived out so that we hear God's voice, abide in his presence, walk in his power and fulfil his purposes in our community.

Endnotes

¹ Practicing the Way, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5852ec829f7456cfcc0e1c5a/t/5e17be5d7cba366ace1df6e1/1578614383140/ptw_ruleoflife_workbook_.pdf

² <https://www.emotionallyhealthy.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Session-8-Go-the-Next-Step-to-Develop-a-Rule-of-Life.pdf>

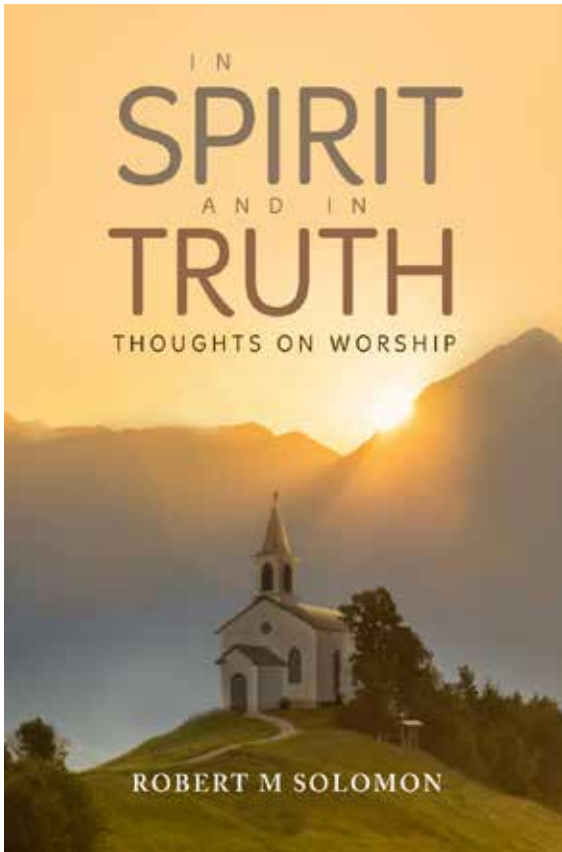
³ <https://www.northumbriacommunity.org/who-we-are/our-rule-of-life/what-is-a-rule-of-life/>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Practicing the Way, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5852ec829f7456cfcc0e1c5a/t/5e17be5d7cba366ace1df6e1/1578614383140/ptw_ruleoflife_workbook_.pdf

Worship in a Post COVID-19 World



**“BUT THE HOUR IS COMING, AND IS NOW HERE, WHEN THE TRUE WORSHIPERS WILL WORSHIP THE FATHER IN SPIRIT AND TRUTH, FOR THE FATHER IS SEEKING SUCH PEOPLE TO WORSHIP HIM.”
JOHN 4:23 (ESV)**

WORSHIP WITHOUT SINGING?

Churches all over the world have found, in this year, the need to adapt to new ways of worshipping the Lord. For two millennia, the Church has always worshipped with congregational singing, and yet, in just a period of a few short months since COVID-19 emerged, many churches are now not able to sing congregationally in worship.

Virtual choirs have given us a semblance of congregational worship singing, though in truth, the singers have mostly sang alone in front of their cameras, and it is up to the video and audio editors to then stitch these videos together to make them "sing together". While there is a sense of worship when we watch these virtual choirs and sing along with them in the privacy of our homes, it still feels quite different to listening to others singing around you and adjusting our pitch, tones and volume so that as one voice we render to God a worship that pleases Him and enriches our souls.

One choir member recently bemoaned to me, "I really miss worshipping God together with everyone else, I just feel like something is missing this past 8 months, and without being able to sing, it just doesn't feel like a real worship to God."

HOW THEN DO WE STILL WORSHIP GOD IF WE CANNOT SING?

Worship in Spirit

In a recent In Deep Worship Conference¹ organized by the TRAC Board of Worship & Music, song writer and worship leader Don Moen was the invited speaker, and he made an excellent point from John 4:23, that when Jesus was asked about worship, He answered by stating that “true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth” but did not mention singing. From a song writer and worship leader point of view, Don Moen found it amazing that Jesus did not mention singing at all.

While of course singing has always been and always will be an integral part of the Christian worship of God, but there is something deeper here that, in the absence of congregational singing, we can rediscover, and that is that the act of singing in itself is not worship, but it is the singing to whom that is worship. A worship in spirit, acknowledges that God is spirit (John 4:23) and it is in the adoring of God who is spirit, in spirit, that is worship.

Therefore, even if one cannot sing, one can still worship God by intentionally coming before God, acknowledging His Presence in the spirit in our midst, adoring Him and rendering to Him a worship, that may not be filled with singing, but filled with praise and adoration, spoken or unspoken.

Churches can help to do so by reading psalms of praise together, or for the worship leader to lead in an acknowledgement of God’s Presence with the congregation expressing their



awe and adoration in either pre-scripted or spontaneous prayers; thereby acknowledging that God who is present in spirit, is worthy to be worshipped and praised.

Worship in Scripture

Jesus in John 4:23 did not just mention worship in spirit, but in truth as well. This may refer to how the Samaritans were worshipping on Mount Gerizim rather than in Jerusalem, and how they have deviated from the truth; but because Jesus said in verse 21 that the hour is coming when the Father will be worshipped neither on Mount Gerizim nor Jerusalem should alert us to the fact that Jesus is surely implying something deeper than just the location of the worship.

As noted before, Jesus mentioned a worship that is rendered in spirit, which of course implies, as contrasted to the question raised by the Samaritan woman, that God can be worshipped from anywhere (for us therefore, our worship unto God can be rendered both in church or in our homes).

At the same time, the worship must be rendered in truth, and in the context of Jesus' whole conversation with the Samaritan women, it is likely that, at least in part, what Jesus meant by in truth, is the knowledge of who the true God is. This knowledge comes to us now through the Scriptures, the revealed Word of God. Therefore, for us to grow in our true worship of God, even without singing, we can still do so by digging deep into the Scriptures to discover His character, His ways and His purposes. By doing so, we worship in truth.

Churches can help to do so by encouraging, not just hearing the exposition of God's Word by the preacher, but by corporately reading God's Word together, and listening to God's truth being proclaimed; thereby worshipping God in truth (quite literally so, but also figuratively).

Worship in Silence

Finally, Christians can also rediscover the ancient practice of the worship of God in silence. In Bishop Dr Robert Solomon's book, "In Spirit and in Truth: Thoughts on Worship", Bishop notes of how in 1 Samuel 15:22, it is better for us to obey than sacrifice, and that's what the LORD delights in, our obedience.

Bishop goes on to note that we can better obey, if we learn to listen, and we can better listen, if we learn to be silent. (Bishop notes interestingly that the words "listen" and "silent" can be formed interchangeably when the letters are re-arranged).

With singing voices needing to fall silent in churches, this is perhaps a good time to also rediscover this form of worship, where we turn our attention from the sacrifices of praise, to the listening in silence, readying our hearts to obey whatever the LORD may speak into our hearts.

Churches can help to do so by incorporating silence into our worship services, whether onsite or online, to cultivate the discipline of being silent before God, so that our hearts may be tuned to listening, in order that we might obey, thereby pleasing God and worshipping Him.

WORSHIPPERS THAT GOD SEEKS

Even though we cannot worship God corporately with songs, can we still be the kind of true worshippers that God seeks, we can if we worship in spirit, in scripture and in silence.

Endnotes

¹ In Deep Worship Conference, 7th November 2020, via Zoom and Face Book Live, a recording can be viewed at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1646514275608332>.

In March, my husband and I had wanted to help Malaysians left stranded in Singapore during the COVID-19 circuit-breaker.

We registered with volunteer group Homeless Hearts of Singapore to be matched with suitable homeless individuals. However, our 1st potential stayer pulled out of the boarding arrangement a few hours prior the check-in. When she realised that she would pay nothing to stay with us, she exclaimed, “Nothing comes free in Singapore!”

Radical hospitality to strangers is seldom practiced in Singapore. Since young, we were taught that strangers have potential power to trick or harm us. The thought of welcoming unfamiliar persons into our private space sparks fear in us. We perceive that it is risky and unwise. So we shut our doors and refrain from smiling to others in the lift lobby. But what if extending hospitality to strangers and needy neighbours is the sacred ground to encounter Jesus?



Sharing a meal with a Christian worker on respite from her work in Cambodia.

Radical Welcome

In the Gospels, Jesus welcomed children, the sick, the lost and the least, and people with questions. He was homeless yet hospitable. When we do likewise, we share in the life of Christ and live out the Gospel message authentically. Besides, God may have orchestrated the stranger’s intrusion into our lives. Jesus could have come with the unknown person with an unexpected need (Matthew 25:35). Angels could have sent strangers to us (Hebrews 13:2). These unfamiliar guests may be worth more than they appear. By welcoming them, we join God in the supernatural work of turning strangers into neighbours, and neighbours into the family of God.

My experience with hospitality came from observing my mentors' example. Their lifestyle of sharing their resources and home with others inspired me not to wait for the perfect season to practice hospitality. Hospitality has little to do with the state of my home and more to do with the state of my heart. To offer someone a safe place to come, to hear and acknowledge them, and to offer them rest without expecting anything in return. Since our 1st home, my husband and I have hosted troubled teenagers, single parent, struggling Christians and missionaries on assignment in Singapore. They come to us through recommendation.

Welcoming strangers do surface painful and dark feelings within me. Food crumbs, things taken but not returned to where they belong, broken electrical appliances, the limitation of personal space; these are some examples of discomfort and inconveniences. But God has also used these imperfections to fortify my character. I grow as I deal with the shadows of anxiety, bias and judgement hidden within my soul. One example of bias is the assumption that poverty is always a result of low efforts or poor individual choice. But sheltering a homeless mom and her toddler opened my eyes to social structures that discriminate against marginalized groups.

Today, my young homeless friend is no longer homeless. She has found permanent shelter, a stable job and is re-sitting for her "O" level examinations this year. Her turnaround happened because various Christians acted in love towards her. She said: "I was a stranger in pain but you stood in solidarity with me." This experience made me realise how essential kindness is.



Spending time shopping with a single mom and her toddler.

I hope the Methodists will not be too intimidated by the idea of risk to extend a welcome and seek the welfare of others. Tackle unpreparedness by reading up on hospitality from Scriptures and Christian literature. Be kind to strangers whenever we can: Share food, offer conversation, practice respect. Shop for senior neighbours. Deliver meals to the sick. Be present to the sorrow of the jobless. Befriend a migrant worker who misses his family back home. Protect others through personal hygiene and appropriate distance. By doing so, we love the stranger in the same way that Christ has loved us.

Witness in a COVID-19 World

Sian Yee recently retired as a staff with the Christian Outreach and Social Concerns (COSC) Ministry at Wesley Methodist Church after serving for over 10 years in a full-time capacity.

HOW WILL YOU REMEMBER 2020?

Chances are, 2020 will be etched in our minds as the year where the novel coronavirus pandemic, known as COVID-19, brought the world to its knees, causing over a million deaths globally by mid-October 2020 and threatening to plunge the global economy into its greatest recession since World War 2.

In Singapore, there was the initial frenzy of panic to stock up on face masks, hand sanitizers, toilet paper and food. Soon enough, our new normal included a slew of acronyms to pepper our conversations, such as LOA, PHPC, WFH, CB, HBL, SHN, NCID, DORSCON – no prizes if you got them all right!

As Christians, the impact of COVID -19 was most keenly felt when physical worship services and physical gatherings had to be abruptly suspended for a season, thereby disrupting the “sacred rhythms” which many of us rely on to practice our faith.

As devastating as COVID-19 has been to the world, our nation, and our religious gatherings, we must not allow it to hijack or dictate the narrative of our lives, or our faith. The Christian life must be viewed and lived, within the context of a story that is far bigger than the pandemic i.e., the story of God. With all the uncertainty, fear, suffering, and hopelessness



Mid- Autumn Celebrations had to be scaled down, but volunteers continued to bring cheer to the elderly with mooncakes donated by a volunteer

caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, there has never been a more urgent time for our generation to live out the Gospel of hope.

It is heartening that instead of retreating in fear or simply looking after her own, many churches in Singapore have been seeking the welfare of the city, demonstrating hospitality, service and love to the most affected and vulnerable in society. While this article seeks to share various initiatives taken by Wesley Methodist Church, as an expression of her faith and witness to Christ, we do so acknowledging that we are but one of many parts of the Body of Christ in Singapore that is seeking to be a faithful witness to the Son, who is full of Grace and Truth. All Glory be to God!

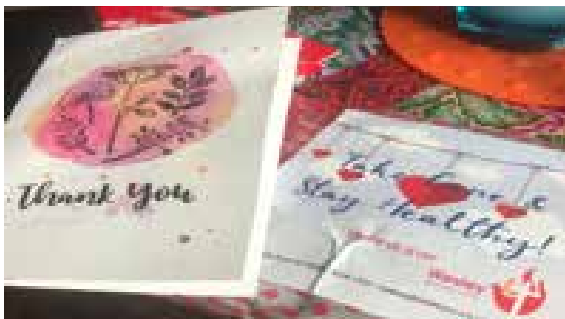
VULNERABLE WITHIN THE FAITH COMMUNITY

Noting that there were vulnerable within our midst, a "Call to Care" initiative was undertaken to connect with over 3,000 members and friends who were not actively part of a support network.

The aim was to ascertain their well-being, provide support for any social or spiritual needs as well as to help them stay engaged with the faith community via online worship. Many appreciated the expression of care and pastoral visitations were made to some upon their request, when permitted.

FRONT-LINE WORKERS

The Missions Ministry rallied members to help make cards for those who were working at hospitals and clinics to show their care and support. Over 300 cards were hand-delivered to our frontline heroes. Cleaning staff at a few government hospitals were also given care packages.



Cards of Appreciation to Frontline workers personally signed by our PIC

MIGRANT WORKERS

COVID-19 exposed the plight of the many thousands of migrant workers living in dormitories. COSC, with the support of the Small Group Ministry, sought to care for hundreds of migrant workers in various ways as they wrestled with feelings of anxiety, fear and isolation. Fruits, food, care packages and cards were delivered periodically to them at dormitories where they were isolated.



About 300 Deepavali meals were delivered to Pandan and Tuas dormitories in support of the project by AGWO & MOM.



Fruits sponsorship by Small Groups

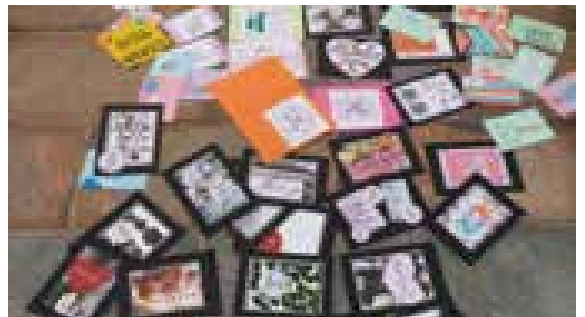
ELDERLY IN THE COMMUNITY

Wesley Befrienders to Older Persons (WBOP), a sub-ministry of COSC that has been supporting the frail elderly living in rental flats in Indus Road, King George's Avenue and Jalan Berseh, stepped up its activities to ensure that the elderly were cared for. During the circuit breaker period, the younger pool of volunteers made phone calls and delivered necessities like groceries and sundries to the elderly.

The WBOP Ministry found creative ways to stay connected to residents in the nursing homes (such as MWS Bethany Nursing Home and Green Avenue Home for the Elderly) when visitations were suspended due to COVID-19 measures. They made cards and delivered them to the home; they also recorded songs on video for the residents, to be played by staff at the homes. Special food treats such as Old Chang Kee curry puffs and bean curd were delivered periodically as gestures of love, care, and friendship.



WBOP befrienders delivering meals and fruits and checking in on elderly living alone in rental flats after the circuit breaker.



Cards made by volunteers for nursing home residents.

CHILDREN, YOUTHS & THEIR FAMILIES IN THE COMMUNITY

The Wesley Youth Centre (WYC) at Jalan Berseh arranged for tuition to continue online for about 40 young people preparing for major examinations. The Owl Reading programme, a reading programme for younger children in the community, continued via Zoom.

In July, volunteers and staff also connected with families in Jalan Berseh through phone calls and followed up with delivery care packs to the homes.



Owl Reading on-line



WYC Carepackage delivery

CHRISTMAS SEASON

2300 Christmas cards were personally made by members to be sent to migrants, elders, and families in the community with other gift items contributed by members.

While 2020 has certainly drawn us all closer to our human frailty, our hope is that these cards and gifts will draw them to the hope of the Incarnation.



Cards personally made to share the hope of Christmas.

LET US NOT MISS THIS OPPORTUNITY TO BE WITNESSES!

Jesus did not come to bring hope to a world where things were going well, but to a fragile and broken world — one full of fragile, damaged and sinful people. And what Jesus says to us is “do not fear.” He tells us that, “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33)

Amidst the “shaking” caused by this pandemic, the world is looking for hope, direction, and purpose. In this hour, family, friends, neighbours and the vulnerable in society need to experience the tangible love of Christ more than ever. Now is the hour for bold and courageous Christian witness!

While we give thanks for various church-wide initiatives to witness to the love and hope of Christ to society at large, the clarion call is for more believers to appropriate the Kingdom assignment to be witnesses to Christ in our personal lives, rather than simply leaving it to church leaders and staff to initiate.

The Christian ethicist, Philp Turner, reminds us of the importance of personal witness when he says, “The exemplary power of lives well lived, is perhaps a key way the church models the truth of the life and death of Jesus Christ.” Christians show they are people of love and hope by following Jesus and living out his teaching to love our neighbour in tangible ways, especially the vulnerable, poor, and marginalized in our homes, offices and neighbourhoods.

Christian witnessing starts by taking baby-steps intentionally: a word of concern or encouragement, a listening ear, a much-needed meal, an embracing gesture of hospitality, an act of kindness, a gift of time and availability or a prayer of intercession. All these offered in servanthood to Christ and our neighbour, can be used by the Lord to lift the spirit of the weary traveller to take another step, and to move closer to the Kingdom.

Let us, the people of God, not squander this moment to be faithful witnesses to our Lord Jesus Christ. Let us not waste a pandemic.

Wonder in a COVID-19 World

Among the Five Ws that have guided TRAC in the past two quadrenniums, the W of Wonder has often been the quirky youngest child of the family – not always understood, commanding less prominence and decorum than its older siblings, and generally considered “non-essential” (a sensitive term in these times of pandemic no doubt) in comparison to the weighty and more tangible Ws in the series. It is important to maintain a sense of wonder and awe in our view of God, but is it as important as reading the Word, expressing our Worship, Welcoming our neighbour, or Witnessing to the saving work of God? Yet losing Wonder would be akin to losing the little finger, and our ministry in the other four Ws suddenly lose their impact and significance.

Any speculation into the shape of ministry in a post COVID-19 world would therefore be incomplete without a similar inquiry into the shape of Wonder. Wonder has often paradoxically served as both a restraint and a key. It is a restraint in that Wonder reminds us of

our place in the grand scheme of things: God is God and we are not, to borrow the words of Steven Curtis Chapman. It brings to mind the humble awe of the Psalmist in Psalm 8:

- O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.
- Out of the mouths of babes and infants
- you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger.
- When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established;
- what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?¹

Wonder restrains us from making messiahs of ourselves, recognizing that we cannot engage in the goodness of this world, and God’s redeeming work within it, apart from the grace of God. It prevents us from taking pride in what we accomplish in the other Ws,

lest we be scattered and cast down from our manmade thrones.²

Yet Wonder is not a brutal oppressor bent on making us crawl on our bellies with the serpent. Rather, by restraining our hubris Wonder concurrently unlocks an entirely new realm of possibilities, once beyond the reach of finite humanity but now effortlessly realised by the infinite Divine. Because God is the source and enabler of all ministry in the Five Ws, not only are all things really possible for those who believe in him, but things beyond our vision can take place as part of God's mysterious will.³

This paradox of at once restraining and unleashing will continue to shape the role of Wonder in the new normal. In the days before COVID-19, ministry in the area of Wonder has often developed along complementary lines akin to the parallels of General and Special Revelation. This has also been covered by OnTRAC previously: the July 2017 issue covered testimonies of people who experienced the supernatural wonders of healings, signs, and visions; the Nov 2017 issue shared stories of Methodists whose eyes were opened to the wondrous presence of God amid natural, everyday relationships and circumstances.

There is little reason to doubt that the same pattern will continue in the wake of a pandemic – does God cease revealing himself during a pandemic? Does he also practice social distancing? Surely not, and both General and Special Revelation continue to unfold even in these challenging times. How would this look like in this new normal?

GENERAL REVELATION

General Revelation is understood to be how God has revealed himself to humans via the natural things of Creation. The words of Psalm 19 come to mind:

- The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
- Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge.
- There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard;
- yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.⁴

Like a father who delights in his child, God has been playing a game of divine peekaboo with humanity, and glimpses of God can be found – if we would but take the time to see. Before COVID-19 Singaporeans were among the more well-travelled of society, contributing significantly to the travel industry. The world calls it wanderlust, a desire to leave the routines of life and experience new sights and sounds in other parts of the world. I venture that it is not merely wanderlust, but that deep down inside us we are wired to appreciate the beauty of creation. Each time we stop and admire the beauty of Creation – not just in nature but in people and culture – our spirits are nourished as we get a glimpse of the fingerprints of the Divine.

That same desire could be why people still long to wander today. Travel has regrettably been significantly curtailed as of this time of writing, but an unexpected consequence of the circuit breaker has been a renewed interest in outdoor exercise. The end of the Circuit Breaker led to a large mass of hikers at our parks, much to the alarm of the authorities. Personal wellbeing and fitness were certainly among the reasons for this trend, but the weeks spent in enforced lockdown have likely added fuel to the desire to leave the urban jungle and be surrounded by the natural beauty God has given this world.

The turn towards home-based learning and work from home arrangements also brought with it a renewed focus on the family life – both positively and negatively. Many family tensions were exacerbated in the close confines of the Circuit Breaker, but many were also challenged to renew and strengthen their relationships with one another. These also serve as opportunities to behold God. Seeing Christ in the “other” has been a long-standing tradition of the Church, using Jesus’ shocking claim that what we do to the least and the last of society we do to him.⁵ Since the basis of this claim is our shared humanity in being made in the image of God, this principle should also be applied to those closest to us. Familiarity often breeds contempt, and we often fail to notice the wondrous work of God in the lives of our loved ones. How often have we paused to admire the curiosity and adventurousness and frivolity of children, and how often have we wondered how God could have wired them in this manner? How often have we mused at how those we hold close to our heart have grown and changed over the years – who has been guiding them and shaping them?

Lastly the race for a vaccine, while surely motivated by profit and nationalism, should also serve as a window into wonder. How far medicine has come, that what used to take years of development has been dramatically reduced to ten months through breakthroughs in biomedical science.⁶ Such human ingenuity cannot have erupted spontaneously, but is a natural consequence of humans being made in the image of God (therefore reflecting to some degree his creativity and resolve), while also being charged to exercise authority over the earth, putting the resources God has made available in this world to good use for the benefit of humanity.⁷

Ministry in a post COVID-19 world should continue to create avenues for people to

pause and experience anew the General Revelation of God, particularly in the three areas of nature, people, and technology.

SPECIAL REVELATION

Unlike General Revelation, that is freely available to all who would open their eyes to see, Special Revelation is how God removes the veil and reveals himself to us in direct, supernatural ways. Scripture is often considered to be the most common form of Special Revelation, but a separate article in this issue has been devoted to the Word. Instead, we focus on miracles. It is no coincidence that the word “wonder” is often paired with “signs”. For the most part, the presence of signs and wonders is not unfamiliar to the Church, although different Christians may have different positions as to how normative they should be.

Healing services have been part and parcel of the ministry of Church, and Christians often pray for healing, as instructed to by the Apostle James.⁸ The supernatural healing that takes place (contrasted with the natural healing God effects through medical science) serves as another window into the wonder of God. No less dramatic are the instances when God reveals himself supernaturally, in the form of visions, or the imparting a word of divine knowledge, or of divine empowerment to face a dark valley.

The realities of COVID-19, and the dangers of mass gatherings will surely challenge the conventional understanding of the ministry of healing. The concept of mass healing rallies with a charismatic (in all the senses of the word) speaker ministering to the masses, with people crammed in a worship space singing and hugging, intermingling across zones and with prayer intercessors at the altar, will surely send chills down the spines of Safe Management Officers. Altar ministry as we know it, with prayer intercessors coming up close and praying

into the ears of a congregant, speaking words of knowledge and encouragement, will also likely not make a comeback anytime soon. Yet these remain the forms of God's supernatural power and must not be confused with its substance.

Since healing and the supernatural intervention of God defies the natural order, whether the world is in a grip of a pandemic matters little to the question of whether God still engages in Special Revelation today. If anything, the presence of a pandemic creates even more conditions for God to operate supernaturally. For healing to take place one must first be afflicted by sickness; for the peace of God to reign one must face the threat of a metaphorical storm. We can expect that it will be business as usual, as far as God and his supernatural power is concerned.

Stories will surely abound even more of miracles defying the odds of medical science, of treatments no longer needed, or even divine words of encouragement that enabled patients to face the affliction of sickness and disease. These stories must be shared, not because we can expect supernatural healing to be normative, but because these stories of healing and grace serve as defiant hallelujahs in the face of death, declaring that we are an Easter people whose God is the triumphant Lamb.⁹

A large part of the ministry of Wonder will therefore involve the collation and sharing of these stories, from patients,

healthcare workers, caregivers, and the like. Storytelling adapts very well to the realities of a post COVID world, where people have grown used to using technology to share and communicate across the globe, without having to be physically present in the same room. Stories can not only be told but retold, weaving itself into the bigger tapestry of God's story, that becomes even more accessible than ever to those within and without the Church.

LEARNING TO BEHOLD

What we see then is that God does not and will not cease to reveal himself to his creation. The challenge is for his creation to learn to see God with new eyes, in the face of a different circumstance. Just as our eyes need to adjust to darkness and vice versa, the pandemic that has gripped the world requires our eyes to be readjusted. The ministry of the Church, in relation to Wonder, will therefore be one of discipling the people of God to see with renewed spiritual eyes. It will require a capacity to carve out space in our lives and to slow down, to pause and to contemplate what we see before us through the lens of being an Easter people. Our message to the world becomes one less of despair and resignation to the inconveniences and pains of post-COVID life, but one that urges humanity to pause and take a second glance at the situation, to see how the God we worship is indeed a God who takes what the enemy intended for evil, to turn it into something good.¹⁰

Endnotes

¹ Psalm 8:1-4 (NRSV).

² Luke 1:51-52 (NRSV).

³ Luke 1:51-52 (NRSV).

⁴ Psalm 19:1-4a (NRSV).

⁵ Matthew 25:40 (NRSV).

⁶ Anne Trafton, "Explained: Why RNA Vaccines for Covid-19 Raced to the Front of the Pack," MIT News | Massachusetts Institute of Technology, accessed December 12, 2020, <https://news.mit.edu/2020/rna-vaccines-explained-covid-19-1211>.

⁷ Genesis 1:27-31 (NRSV).

⁸ James 5:14-15 (NRSV).

⁹ John Paul II, "Angelus, 30 November 1986" [Adelaide, Australia, November 30, 1986], accessed December 7, 2020, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/angelus/1986/documents/hf_jp-ii_ang_19861130.html.

¹⁰ Genesis 50:20 (NRSV).

NEW MOTS, DEACONS, AND ELDERS



Pastor Clement Ong

Pastor Clement received Jesus as His Lord and Savior in 1990 through the ministry of the Boys' Brigade. He was enrolled into the ECA as a school disciplinary action but was touched by the Lord through the officers who personified God's unceasing love.

He received his call to full time ministry in 1997 and began serving as a youth ministry staff in 2004 with Ang Mo Kio Presbyterian Church with a burden for the wayward youths and young adults both in church and in his chaplaincy school Presbyterian High, which was his alma mater.

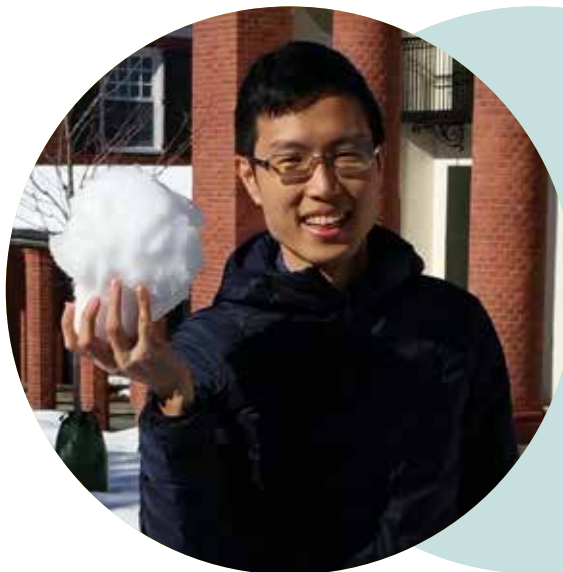
He began his pastoral ministry in 2011 after he graduated from Trinity Theological College and also served as a Chaplain to both a BB and GB company.

Clement started serving at Wesley Methodist Church in 2015 as a Pastoral Team Member, where he served with the Small group ministry, Family Life and the Prayer & Praise Worship ministry. He is currently assigned back to Wesley as an assistant pastor.

Clement is married to Ping Ping for 13 years and they have 2 boys, Asher (12) and Aiden (9). He enjoys running (though he isn't running much these days) and a good cup of "yuan yang" anytime!



NEW MOTS, DEACONS, AND ELDERS

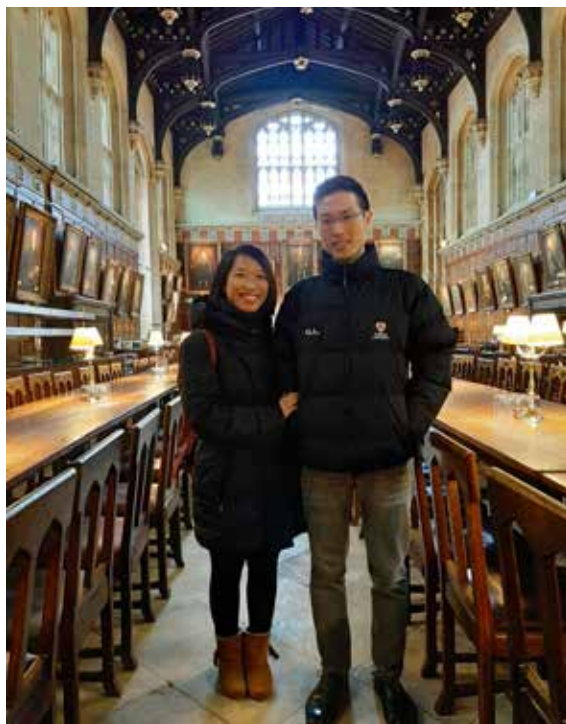


Pastor Gilbert Lok

Pastor Gilbert wants to be a builder - to build up God's people to please Him and be pleased in Him. Gilbert holds many fond memories of Aldersgate Methodist Church, where he served as a layperson in areas as small groups, youth, young adults, and governance. Before entering pastoral ministry, Gilbert worked as a civil servant, heading a small team of policy researchers and strategists in the Prime Minister's Office. Gilbert has undergraduate training in Economics (NUS), and postgraduate degrees in Divinity (TTC) and New Testament (Oxford).

Gilbert is happily married to Grace, a social worker and play therapist. The couple met through the campus ministry of Varsity Christian Fellowship (Fellowship of Evangelical Students), where they continue to serve. Gilbert's interests include early Christian writings, the interface of economics-ethics-theology, and monastic spirituality (he once spent a month at an Anglican monastery). Gilbert also enjoys a workout or a decent run, a good book,

British TV (Dr Who, University Challenge, Sherlock), or a nice round of strategy board games (Catan, not Monopoly).



NEW MOTS, DEACONS, AND ELDERS



Rev Chan Mei Ming

Pastor Mei Ming was a Registered Nurse for some seven and a half years before she went to pursue theological studies at the Baptist Theological Seminary Singapore. Upon graduation, she served in the International Baptist Church Singapore, and subsequently at the Leng Kwang Baptist Church. She was ordained a Baptist Minister in 2012.

Grateful for the many years and breadth of pastoral ministry experience in the Baptist denomination, Mei Ming nevertheless had a growing sense that God was leading her out of the Baptist denomination to re-connect with her Methodist roots that tracked back to her early formative years in the Methodist Girls' School and right through her Anglo Chinese Junior College years. Amongst other things, it was a key Methodist distinctive of "connectionalism" that drew her to be willing to take up the challenges of the 'road less travelled' and

to eventually join the Methodist Church in Singapore as Deacon in August 2020.

Mei Ming is immensely thankful to the many who have encouraged and supported her in this journey! She remains eternally grateful to the Almighty God who made possible what she thought was impossible.





Deacons - Rev Allan Lee, Rev Joey Chen, Rev Benjamin Lau, Rev Alex Chew



Elders - Rev Poh Zhi-Hui, Rev Eddie Ho, Rev Byron Teo



Editorial Board:

Bp Dr Gordon Wong, Rev Benjamin Fong, Rev David Ho SH, Rev Eddie Ho, Rev Poh Zhi Hui, Rev Alex Chew, and Rev Allan Lee.

OnTrac is published by Trinity Annual Conference (TRAC), 70 Barker Road Road #05-05, Singapore 309936 Tel: 6478 4742 Fax: 6478 4740 www.trac-mcs.org.sg

Designed by First Printers

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