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Forum

Field Reports on Religious Life in the Time of COVID-19

Please note: This is a reduced-size version of the forum for those with slower internet connections. For a full version of the forum, including video, please visit the journal's website at prs-journal.org.

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Introduction from the editor

This issue's forum is somewhat different than those we have run previously. The unfolding COVID-19 pandemic has caused a sudden and profound disruption to religious life across the world. Shannon Crago-Snell and Todd E. Johnson, in a Christian context, write that the pandemic "instigated more extreme and rapid changes in how Christian practices are performed than any other event since the Reformation" (Crago-Snell and Johnson 2020: 1). Those aspects of religious life which were most disrupted were precisely those which were most closely linked to performance: those which involved congregation, communal action, live rituals, and the co-presence of communities in the same space. The spiritual and social functions that these rituals and community activities served were still essential; in fact, many of them became even more critical during these times of broad, generalised uncertainty and anxiety

Just as theatres have, religious groups have embraced this challenge and have adapted their work to take account of these new conditions. Across the world, communities have found new ways to adapt their ritual lives, using technology of all sorts. These innovations have happened with urgency, often without coordination; they were developed through a strong practical understanding of the needs, expectations, possibilities, and challenges that each community faced. Because these fire-forged innovations were so urgently needed, the work of sharing and analysing them was put off; first the work would be done, and then it could be understood. While academic analyses of these innovations are starting to be written, there remains a real need to simply share what is going on at the coal face.

This forum contributes to that task. We have for you a set of short field reports on the ways in which religious (and, in one case, theatrical) life has continued and changed in the time of the pandemic. These reports shed light on the resilience of religious life across the world. This pandemic has been an assault both on the bare biological basis of our lives and the social fabric that makes them livable. Taken together, these reports shed light on how that assault has highlighted both our common humanity and our social distance from one another. They also hint at new possibilities for the ways that our religious and spiritual lives might be lived and performed in the future, ways we are only beginning to understand.

We are grateful to all of the contributors to this section for their diligence, their vision and their generosity. As always, we welcome reader feedback and contributions to our forum, which we are happy to publish in subsequent issues. Please email the editor at j.edelman@mmu.ac.uk.

Peter Bush: Virtual Worship during COVID-19: A report from Canada

In March 2020 congregations across Canada closed their doors to in-person worship as public health officials sought to limit the spread of COVID-19. These closures led to most congregations moving towards virtual worship – livestreaming, Zoom, pre-taping – with YouTube as the platform where the resulting record of the worship gatherings are stored. What follows grows out of viewing a range of worship services from Protestant, primarily Presbyterian, churches in Canada, and from conversations with clergy and worship leaders. A question in the background of this discussion is this: what has virtual worship revealed as being central to Christian worship in Canada during the pandemic?

The vast majority of Canadian Protestant congregations have tried to develop an on-line presence. Each community's desire to have its own particular congregational life expressed in a weekly worship service was very high during the first three months of shutdown. Only with the coming of summer, and what is normally holiday time, have significant numbers of congregations started to work together in providing joint on-line services.

The worship space

COVID-19 has freed congregations from their worship space; that is, both where the members of the congregation are as they participate in worship and where the worship leaders are located as they lead services has expanded.

Congregation members watch from comfortable chairs in their living rooms; sitting in the den watching a computer screen; or, if they are watching a recording of the service, catch the service in bits as they do other things through the course of their day. Congregational members have asked that pre-taped services have markings on the time bar at the start of each new "scene" so viewers can skip over parts they wish not to see. Re-locating where worship is experienced by the congregation/audience changes the experience of that worship.

The service may be streamed from or recorded in locations outside the sanctuary worship space. A number of congregational leaders, took the closure of in-person worship to mean the closure of church buildings to any activity of any kind, and moved the worship experience to their home. The logic being that, if congregation members were locked down at home, so was the worship experience. Some worship leaders and preachers have led services from makeshift worship spaces set up in their homes. Others gave up any pretense and simply used their home offices as the backdrop to the worship leading. At least one minister recognizing that the congregation is watching from their living rooms, streams the service from her living room. The choice of location shapes the rituals of worship. The leaders and preachers are in more intimate space than a church sanctuary therefore the voice is softened, the intensity less, the actions of speakers more muted. Frequently the sermon is delivered with the preacher seated at their desk or kitchen table, with the laptop functioning as both teleprompter and camera.

Other congregations, on learning that small groups (in Ontario it was 5 or fewer people) could gather for work purposes, decided to film in the church building. Some congregations re-configured the worship space to make it more camera friendly. Even in re-configured worship space, in choosing to film in or stream from sacred space these worship teams have sought to use the visual cues of the space – pulpit, font, table, stained glass windows, banners – to prepare the congregation for worship.

The content of worship

The Rev. Matthew Brough posted on The Presbyterian Church in Canada's unofficial Facebook page in June 2020:

A request. Our congregation is not having services in July as a way of me and other staff taking much needed vacation. We want to recommend some great livestreams that are public (preferably on YouTube), include music with lyrics, and a sermon.

The Rev. Brough, the minister of Prairie Presbyterian Church in Winnipeg, Manitoba, had a clear sense of what the congregation expected in a virtual worship gathering after three months of leading virtual worship. Livestreaming was important (rather than pre-taping), as it was assumed to provide an immediacy a taped service did not. The worship would include music, including someone singing. Finally, there would be a sermon.

Preaching

The Rev. Brough need not have added the request for a sermon. The Proclamation of the Word – that is – a sermon -- is a central piece of Canadian Presbyterian services available on-line, along with the elements that go with a sermon: scripture readings and prayers of illumination. The sermons, in most cases, are the same length as sermons were before COVID, sometimes running 25 to 30 minutes in length.

Only a handful of congregations have explored alternative models. One church has divided the sermon into two or three parts, with the intention that no single part of the service will be more than twelve minutes long. The mini-sermons are interspersed with music and are often preached in front of different backgrounds to highlight that they are separate yet linked pieces. The lack of experimentation with the sermon form is surprising when so much of the worship experience is being re-worked. Preaching has remained virtually unchanged. Even congregations that pre-tape services have been hesitant to use special effects to highlight moments in the sermon. The sermon remains the Bible preached and is not to be spectacle, appears to be the general consensus.

Music

The Rev. Brough's request for music with singing highlights that including music in on-line services has been particularly challenging for congregations. Some congregations have chosen to have no music at all, deciding the technical challenges were too great. Other congregations have put links to great musical performances by artists outside the congregation in their services. When worshippers come to that part of the service they are to click on the link, watch that, and then return to the service from their home church. Other congregations, seeing this process as awkward, have embedded the music from choirs and worship bands external to the congregation in the service (being careful to avoid copyright issues).

The varying time delays experienced by participants in a Zoom gathering makes saying the Lord's Prayer together aloud and in unison chaotic and corporate singing impossible. With Zoom worship one microphone remains live for the instrument and vocalists; everyone else is muted and so they can sing along with the musician. Participants can see other people in the gathering singing, but they cannot hear the others singing. They cannot actually join their voices with the voices of others in the praise and worship of God.

With both livestreamed worship and pre-recorded services, the same challenge exists. The congregation is able to join with the music leaders in singing, but they cannot hear other congregation members singing, nor can they see them singing. In livestreamed services, as in in-person services, when musical mistakes are made the musicians simply keep on going. With pre-recorded services, when a musical mistake takes place the question arises "should we do another take?" The fact that this question can be asked, moves the pre-recorded service model more into what worship

leaders call “performance”. By that they mean, the musician is performing for an audience rather than inviting a congregation to join them in the worship of God.

Congregational participation

The 19th century Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard suggested Christian worship was not about those on the chancel (stage) performing for the congregation (audience), rather the whole space of the sanctuary was the stage with the congregation members the actors, with God as the audience. The absence of a congregation and the presence of the camera causes worship leaders to see themselves more as performers and less as joint participants with the congregation leading the congregation to worship God.

Those clergy who use Zoom for worship contend that it has allowed their congregations to become more participatory. Tasks can be assigned – doing a scripture reading or leading in prayer – to a wide variety of people some of whom would not be willing to stand in front of a sanctuary but will participate on Zoom. As well, there is space for extemporaneous input as in voicing prayer concerns and bringing news to the congregation.

The security challenges Zoom has confronted means that passwords are needed to join Zoom gatherings. A given congregation’s worship on Zoom is only accessible to those with the password. This plays to a members-only mentality, rather than it being public worship with all the risks inherent in an all-are-welcome open-door policy. While livestreaming and services on YouTube are theoretically open to all, in reality, they are open to those who have computers and internet access, open to those with financial resources and some comfort with the technology.

Worship leaders are struggling to involve congregation members in worship, for even on Zoom it is possible to blank one’s own screen and become an unseen and unheard observer. Some congregations at each worship service invite viewers to light a candle, the words appearing on the screen “Light your candle now.” Another congregation, during Holy Week, invited those watching to extinguish a candle on Good Friday and light it again on Easter Sunday. Many congregations have explored ways to celebrate communion virtually. While not possible within all denominations, in those denominations where it is possible, participants have been invited to join communion even as they sat in their living rooms. Transforming an audience into a congregation and moving people from being observers to being participants is a major challenge for virtual worship.

A concluding word

The Rev. Keith McKee, minister of St. George’s Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario wrote on July 7, 2020 on his Facebook page:

I miss going to church. I miss the scriptures read and proclaimed. I miss the hymns. I miss visiting congregations while I am on vacation. Nothing replaces the presence of other believers. I miss going to church.

The Rev. McKee expresses well the longing for the beauty and awkwardness, the joy and messiness which is at the heart of in-person worship. Nothing can replace being together with a group of other people who are joined together in worship. And that longing is one virtual worship has yet answer.

Eileen D. Crowley: One Small Episcopal Parish Goes Online to Worship and Stay Together

On March 15, 2020, Bishop Jeffrey Lee suspended all in-person Episcopal church services in the Diocese of Chicago, Illinois, in the US. At All Saints' Episcopal Church, four members of the pastoral team, along with a very actively involved Worship Committee of lay people, suddenly had to figure out how to continue to celebrate the liturgy with their faith community by using iPhones and social media.

The team was relatively new and inexperienced. Having arrived at All Saints just four weeks before, Interim Rector Rev. Dr. Stephen Applegate had come to help guide the parish through the 12- to 18-month process of searching for a new rector after the departure of their previous rector who had become a bishop, and to worked with Associate Rector Rev. Andrew Rutledge, who was working to keep the parish "ship afloat". Rev. Andrew had been ordained for less than a year, but Priest Associate Rev. Courtney Reid, who became a part-time member of the pastoral team, had only been ordained for four weeks. Colin Collette was the longest serving member of the pastoral team; he had served as Director of Music since 2017 and had decades of church music experience at other parishes.

Before these four liturgical leaders hardly had a chance to get to know each other, they had to spring into action to respond to the unprecedented ramifications of the Covid-19 pandemic. Interim Rector Rev. Stephen recalls, "I arrived on February 17 and had three Sundays with people in church." That was all. His engagement with parishioners, staff, rector search committee members, the vestry, and other groups would henceforth be via phone, email, text, Facetime, and Zoom.

On that Third Sunday of Lent, March 15, the All Saints' pastoral team scrambled to celebrate Eucharist in an otherwise empty sanctuary. Over previous months, Rev. Andrew had been live-streaming Morning Prayer on Instagram with his iPhone, so they put his experience to good use. They placed that iPhone on a tripod and had to choreograph how best to perform the liturgy within the video and audio limitations of that device. But at the receiving end the audio level was weak, and some people's Facebook feeds occasionally stalled or froze altogether. Parishioners nonetheless persevered and showed up to celebrate Eucharist online for the first time, via Facebook Live. The sight of the church's empty pews was depressing; it symbolized all that they had lost, all the people they could not meet, all the fellow worshipers they could no longer hug.

Before the arrival of COVID-19, the average All Saints' Sunday worship attendance was just under 300 adults and children. On the first Sunday that All Saints' live-streamed their celebration of the Eucharist from the church sanctuary, Facebook data indicated that a similar number of people attended online.

Worshipers took full advantage of the live comment feature on Facebook. They posted 223 times, and launched 103 emojis over the course of the service. They wished each other "Good morning" and "Peace and safety in this sad time." They sent virtual hugs and love. They were spreading good humor, one of the characteristics of All Saints'. "I'm singing the bass part. Anyone singing along?" asked one parishioner.

On Facebook some members posted photos of the special settings they had prepared for celebrating Eucharist, including special cups and glasses for wine, china to hold their homemade bread, candles, linens, crosses, and the Book of Common Prayer. Interim Rector Rev. Stephen noted:

We have been purposely vague about what is happening when the eucharist is being celebrated at one end of the camera-tv/computer/handheld device. I see this as consistent with Anglican/Episcopal eucharistic theology which, while believing in the Real Presence of Christ in the sacrament, is agnostic about how that happens.... People's laying out bread and wine seems to have been a spontaneous response. I learned about it fairly quickly through Facebook I never addressed the issue – whether people should or shouldn't do that – what was happening when they received bread and wine. The important thing to me was and is that people are being “fed” through the service, and that they feel a sense of closeness and connection to God and to one another by participating.

Before the following Sunday, the Chicago bishop sent out additional guidelines regarding online worship. Churches were not to record or livestream their services in empty churches, as All Saints' had done the week before. Of course, the bishop reminded everyone, Eucharist could only be celebrated if there were two people present.

While many parishes chose to record or live stream Morning Prayer or a Liturgy of the Word, often referred to as an AnteCommunion service, All Saints' leadership chose to continue celebrating Eucharist. Rev. Stephen shared how they came to that decision:

All Saints' Sunday services before the pandemic were all Holy Eucharist. We wanted a pastoral response to the uncertainty, fear, and loss that we anticipated people were going to be feeling. We did not feel that we ought to change the form of the Sunday service. And we thought that changing to something different like Morning Prayer or AnteCommunion was not the right pastoral response – regardless of what eucharistic theologians were saying.

Meanwhile, the bishop instructed all clergy and lay personnel to work from home. They were not even supposed to go into their churches! Fortunately for All Saints', the Interim Rector's wife, Terry Applegate, came from Ohio to join him in the lock-down in the rectory. Because of her presence, that next Sunday, Week 2, the Applegates were able to celebrate and livestream the March 22 Eucharist from the rectory dining room.

A first-grade teacher skilled in making classroom art, Terry decorated the dining room's French doors with colored paper in a geometric pattern similar to the pattern found on the sanctuary's 19th-century stained glass windows. Fortuitously, both Applegates were singers, and Rev. Stephen could play guitar. That Sunday they served in more liturgical and technical roles than they could ever have imagined: as environmental artists, music ministers, reader/acolyte, presider/preachers, videographers, and media producers.

During the Week 3 Eucharist, worshipers were grateful to experience another innovation—Rev. Andrew's pre-recorded sermon. It appeared on a TV monitor placed on the dining room table, the iPhone turned to the screen for all to see. During the service, worshipers posted their liturgical responses of “Amen” and “Thanks be to God” and “Peace be with you.” Many sang the songs at home. Some parishioners had set up their home altars in relationship to their largest TV screen.

Rev. Andrew, who became the parish's *de facto* media producer, invited people to submit their family photos. Using those new photos and ones already in the parish files, the pastoral leaders printed out large photos of parishioners and used pipe cleaners to hang them on the pews. The photos filled the church with faces and gave delight to those who a few weeks earlier had seen an empty church.

Meanwhile, the Director of Music, Colin Collette, was producing music tracks for choir members to use in recording their parts for music for the whole Sunday service, including the special music for Holy Week/Easter Triduum services. A parish volunteer edited the individual audio submissions together into choral songs.

Rev. Andrew produced the dynamic equivalent of a Palm Sunday procession for Week 4. A video montage of photographs from previous Palm Sunday processions visually brought worshipers from the parish hall, down the sidewalks, up the front stairs and doors into the worship space where the lively song, "We are marching in the light of God," seemed to be rocking the community. Parishioners posted 179 comments during that Palm Sunday worship, including, "Good morning all. Is the choir lined up?" "Palms look great."

Teams of volunteers, including Worship Committee members, worked intensively before and during Holy Week to produce a variety of online liturgies that were live-streamed on Facebook. Rev. Andrew offered an online healing service from his home. Lay members used their iPhones and Zoom to record scripture, poetry, and intercessions. They led the Wednesday Tenebrae, Good Friday Stations of the Cross, and Good Friday evening liturgy. For the evening service, the talented actors of the All Saints' Players recorded an original one-act play on Zoom, in which they retold the story of the Passion through the eyes of Mary Magdalen and Jesus's other disciples.

Collaborating closely, the pastoral team and parishioners kept up the All Saints' commitment to provide excellent, creative proclamation of a variety of scripture and scripture-based stories for Easter Vigil and Easter Sunday. The pastoral team and dozens of lay people did whatever they could to create these Triduum online liturgies, so that worshipers could celebrate and participate actively at home. They invited worshipers to prepare ahead of time to venerate their own crosses, to light their own candles, to be ready to bless themselves with water in remembrance of their baptism, and to use their home-printed worship aids to respond as usual to ritual dialogue and to sing service parts and congregational songs. Only on Easter Sunday morning did liturgy come once again streamed live from the rectory dining room, with a pre-recorded Liturgy of the Word shown on the TV monitor via an iPhone directed at the screen.

Easter Sunday was the fifth week of online liturgy for the All Saints' community. The worship leaders had learned much, but they were still having technical difficulties. Too many churches were using Facebook at the same time. Worshipers experienced frozen screens on occasion and had to go out of and back into that platform, sometimes multiple times during one service.

Although all of this media was being produced by amateurs, worshipers continued to log on and to participate in these online liturgies. According to Facebook data, attendance at these virtual services continued to be equivalent to pre-Covid-19 attendance.

In response to a post-Easter survey of parishioners' experience of online liturgy, people expressed much gratitude. One said that their favorite aspect was "knowing that

there are others from our community praying at the same time as I am.” Others responded:

That I can finally attend a worship service. I am elderly and live a distance from All Saints’....The best thing about the virtual service is the care taken by the worship team to involve the visual senses in a variety of ways, so that the service doesn’t become a screen with talking heads.

I like to see the faces and hear the voices of people I know.... I could watch, listen to, or read any Episcopal church service to encounter the same words of the liturgy. Seeing my friends, and hearing their voices, and experiencing the elements of joy, play, passion, and creativity that All Saints worship entails, is the best.

Given the many challenges of offering a live service with no media professionals to rely on and no budget for new equipment other than the purchase of an iMac for editing, All Saints’ leadership chose to move to entirely pre-recorded worship as of May 24, ten weeks into offering online worship. Parishioners did not seem to notice any difference. They were just glad the liturgy now went off without a “glitch.”

On June 28, Week 17, Sunday Eucharist once again was offered in the parish sanctuary, by reservation-only at 8 a.m. and 11 a.m. Priests and parishioners all wore masks and kept physically distant from each other. Each week since, fewer than a dozen people have attended each of these services. Before starting in-person worship, the pastoral team announced that the online 9 a.m. Eucharist would continue to be the parish’s main liturgy for the foreseeable future.

During a typical online Sunday Eucharist, worshipers see more than a dozen different faces each week, and even more on Youth Sunday when more than 20 children and teens took on every liturgical role other than presider. Seeing each others’ faces has continued to be very important to All Saints’ worshipers who, for decades, have worshiped in a church with a diamond-shaped seating arrangement that has meant that every week they could easily see and hear each other across the central altar. In addition to online worship, All Saints’ has continued to try to create opportunities for people to see and greet each other through post-worship coffee Zoom gatherings and through Zoom-enabled Bible studies, Morning Prayer, Night Prayer, and Liturgies for Hard Times.

All Saints’ custom of announcing birthdays and anniversaries has gone online. A photo video montage of scores of peoples’ faces appears on-screen at the end of the service as the choir is heard singing multiple times, “God, grant them many years.” In the survey, parishioners repeatedly expressed their gratitude for this online translation of their monthly ritual.

Over more than 20 weeks of online liturgy, All Saints’ has continued to be All Saints’, an Episcopal community that offers spiritual nourishment, creativity and connectedness, as well as many social justice events and programs. Each week, more people started chiming in. As comments come in and emojis float up, the community “gathers and worships actively, joyfully, and together – regardless of forced distancing.” As one parishioner wrote, thanks to online worship, “We are all here together with each other, holding each other up. I feel very blessed.”

Douglas Frimpong-Nnuroh: COVID- 19 and Religious Life in Mary Queen of Peace Catholic Church, Cape Coast, Ghana

The first cases of COVID 19 were reported in Africa in late February 2020, and by March 9, 2020 Burkina Faso, Togo and Cote d'Ivoire had reported cases and the media frenzy in Ghana moved to a high octave.

The first two cases of COVID-19 in Ghana were announced by the Ministry of Health (MOH) in March 2020; this spiralled to 43,260 positive cases by August. President Nana Addo Danquah Akufo Addo announced a raft of measures to deal with the pandemic: closure of the national borders both land and sea, partial lockdown of Greater Kumasi and Greater Accra and Kasoa, the epicentres of the virus at the time. The lockdown was accompanied by restrictions on social activities where only 25 persons could attend private burials, while funerals, weddings and church services were banned until further notice.

In the Cape Coast region, the first case reported on April 8, 2020, was traced to a Reverend Minister who returned from the UK and came to the city to escape the lockdown. Also, fishermen travelling by canoes from neighbouring countries back home who were not screened by port authorities were suspected to have brought the virus into the region which reported 259 cases.

The Parish Priest of Mary Queen of Peace Church in Cape Coast (MQoP), Rev. Fr. David Ocran and his Parochial Vicar Rev. Fr. Emmanuel Adjine used Facebook Live to broadcast virtual sermons daily and Mass on Sundays to parishioners during the lockdown. This allowed parishioners to worship at their homes, even though internet instability and individuals without smart phones or internet access missed the teachings during that period. The Parish Priest proposed a two-way approach to continue the worship. He advocated for a domestic church (ie, a church within worshippers' homes) where he exhorted families to pray and observe the daily readings by meditating on the scriptures. The call for the institution of home study of the Bible by Rev. Fr. Ocran meant that each family could share fellowship together. This gave families a good chance of increasing their religiosity during the dreaded COVID-19 period.

The virus has also affected the sacrament of baptism for children who have attended catechism and thus deemed worthy to partake in the Eucharist during Mass. This is a significant aspect of church growth since these children become the future of the church as they live their faith for a lifetime. Since schools were closed down by the Ghanaian government, the church suspended this medium of instruction. Thus, from March 2020, all catechism lessons remained suspended including the administration of the sacrament of Confirmation after baptism which was officiated by the Archbishop of Cape Coast.

The important ritual of marriage is one of the social activities that were specifically banned in the first restrictions announced by the government in order to control horizontal spread of the virus within communities. Indeed, big weddings are a common feature of the Ghanaian society; during the restrictions, many couples postponed their nuptials until the total lifting of the ban. The Catholic Church is very strict on the sacrament of Holy Matrimony, and a couple must receive it to qualify them to partake in the Eucharist during Mass. At MQoP with a congregation of about 600 worshippers, not celebrating a church wedding since March 2020 due to the corona virus restrictions was a matter of grave concern.

Before the outbreak of COVID-19, MQoP had planned harvest events to raise money to continue infrastructure development activities of the church. The harvest is thanksgiving event in churches in Ghana which aims at selling by auction farm produce and other items of economic or religious value during church service to members so that money could be raised for expansion of physical infrastructure. Often the organisers of church harvests in Ghana invited politicians or key government functionaries, business owners and resourceful persons as chairpersons, co-chairpersons and supporters of the chairpersons with a view to soliciting funds from them. Essentially, such harvests had targets that were set and the purpose was also known to members since such was advertised as major church activities throughout the year. The harvests which were launched in January 2020 were earmarked to raise GHC 20,000 (about US\$3450) on the day. Subsequently, the Men's Harvest of March 9, 2020 had a target of GHC 25,000 while the Women's Harvest to be held on June 14, 2020 was to raise GHC 24,000. The Main Harvest scheduled for December 13, 2020 was also to raise GHC 20,000. The levy of GHC100 (about US\$17) per parishioner was also anticipated to raise GHC 1,000 from those who did not pay it during the men's and women's harvest. Accordingly, MQoP was projecting to raise a total of GHC 90,000 (about US\$15,500) for its capital projects for 2020. As a result of COVID-19 over half of the expected revenue from all the harvests have been lost because both the men's and women's harvests were missed. Other sources of revenue accruing to MQoP were the daily and weekly collections, personal donations, monthly tithes and special contributions to service the church's minibus that brought parishioners from the communities to the church premises daily for Mass. These revenue streams have also been lost to the church in the many months of COVID-19 restrictions. The decision of the Parish Pastoral Council (PPC) was that both the Men and Women's Harvests should be held on September 13, 2020, while the Main Harvest was pushed back to November 28, 2020. Mindful that individual incomes have been generally affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, parishioners have been urged to actively participate in the joint harvest.

From March to August 2020, MQoP has not held funeral services for any of its worshippers in the Church due to the restrictions that were in effect. The funeral of a parishioner scheduled for April 4, 2020 has been postponed to October 2020, because some of the children of the deceased lived outside Ghana and they were unable to come to the country due to closure of the national borders. That no funeral rites have been observed in MQoP does not mean that the Church itself has not been bereaved. The Church lost Mr Joseph Awel, a Senior Catechist in April, and his widow also died in June before his final funeral rites scheduled for November 8, 2020.

MQoP reopened on Sunday June 7, 2020. There were quite a few safety measures put in place, some of which had a substantial effect on the way that the church community worships. First, there is mounting of Veronica buckets¹, tissue paper and liquid soap at the two entrances to the church building. The ushers at the entrance

¹ The Veronica buckets are a plastic bucket with clean water that had its base fitted with a stop pipe. It was mounted on a stand and placed at the entrances of public places including churches that allowed individuals to wash their hands before entering such premises. Designed by Veronica Bekoe, a Ghanaian biological scientist, it was a convenient way of providing clean water to prosecute the public education of washing of hands to avoid infecting one's eyes and nose with hands that might have been contaminated with the corona virus.

were ready with thermometers to take the temperature of each worshipper, as well as the personal details as required by the general guidelines for reopening of the church. At the two exits of the church, hand sanitizers have been affixed to the walls for ease of use by parishioners. Second, Rev. Fr. Emmanuel Adjine, who used to say the virtual Mass via Facebook continues to send his morning reflections on the daily scriptures through WhatsApp to community platforms of parishioners. Third, the duration of Mass at MQoP during the COVID-19 period has been substantially shortened, and the first and second readings were done by the same person to save time. Also, at the peak of the crisis, bidding prayers were said by one person on selected intentions instead of the regular four. Announcements after Mass have also been abridged. Fourth, home church and Bible study was still emphasised and encouraged.

Significantly, the pews in MQoP have been numbered for only three worshippers instead of the original eight persons per row. Using alternating pews also ensured social distancing. The offer of the sign of peace to each other during Mass has been scrapped and, in its place, congregants wave to each other to avoid personal contact, and the possible spread of the virus. Fifth, the Holy Communion is placed in the outstretched hands of the parishioner instead of the tongue. Disinfection of the church premises is done regularly, with sanitization of microphones, lectern and fittings exposed to touch after the first Mass to ensure that the second Mass is performed with minimal or no risk to the worshippers. Finally, all parishioners exiting MQoP use the hand sanitizers to clean their hands.

This report has given an account of COVID -19 in Ghana, and its effects on the religious community of MQoP, 4th Ridge Cape Coast. Clearly, attendance of Mass at MQoP has reduced considerably due to restrictions of space caused by the new sitting arrangements of alternating pews currently in effect. Indeed, regular church life has been affected greatly, but the Parish Priest and his Assistant are taking measures to encourage the faithful to continue their religious practice both in the church and at home.

Ponn P. Mahayosnand: Gaza Ramadan Reflections

Communal Acts of Worship Adapted for COVID-19

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Gaza is one of the most densely-populated areas around the world, with 2.1 million people living in a 140-square-mile area. Gaza's population is 97.5% Muslim, and two-thirds of its population live in refugee camps. Under Israeli-Egyptian blockade since 2007, daily necessities and medical aid, supplies, and personnel cannot easily enter the area. After the 2014 conflict with Israel, the United Nations declared that Gaza may become uninhabitable by 2020 if prevailing economic trends persisted. The fourth quarter of 2019 reported a 43 percent unemployment rate and that 46 percent of the population were living below the US poverty line (\$5.50 a day). Since then, Gaza has not substantially improved economically.

Mills, David *et al.* (2020) analyzed Gaza's current economic status in relations to the COVID-19 pandemic. They concluded that the pandemic should be viewed as a preventable biosocial injustice in its struggle for health. Somdeep, Sen (2020) stated

that countering the impact of the pandemic would assist Gaza with its development needs without having to contend with the (political) stigma of doing so. Since the blockade generally prevents entry of travelers or foreigners, the spread of COVID-19 to Gaza's general population was minimized (Abuhabib, A.A., *et al.* 2020). In March 2020, Gaza quarantined its first COVID-19 cases at its borders. Containment measures included a Gaza-wide lockdown and closure of mass-gathering locations, such as schools, mosques, wedding halls, parks, and restaurants.

Ramadan is the sacred month during which fasting is obligatory upon all healthy adult Muslims. Believers eagerly wait for its social events, communal evening meals, nightly congregational prayers at mosques, continuous community gatherings, and Ramadan-specific acts of worship. On account of COVID-19, Saudi Arabia cancelled *umrah* (the small pilgrimage) in February 2020. It then closed mosques nationwide in mid-March, including the two most sacred sites for Muslims in Mecca and Medina, while recommending that all Muslims adhere to COVID-19 containment measures.

This report reflects upon the experiences of the author's multi-generational family during the month of Ramadan, which took place from April 23 until May 23, 2020, in Gaza. The family consists of two grandparents, fifteen children (both biological and -in-law), and fifty-six grandchildren who live in shared buildings. Such multigenerational living is typical in Gaza. The aim of this report is to analyze how Muslims in Gaza adapted their communal acts during Ramadan because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Some of the safety measures advised by the World Health Organization (WHO) in response to the pandemic were difficult to adhere to, such as physical distancing of one meter between people at all times, as this family's average household is 7.9 people (Gaza's average is 5.5), as well as avoiding kissing, hugging, and shaking hands as a greeting.

Ramadan begins the evening the new moon is sighted. Muslims pray the first *taraweeh* (optional Ramadan prayer after the obligatory nighttime prayer, *ishaa*) in congregation at the mosque (*masjid*). *Taraweeh* is highly encouraged at the mosque, but it can also be performed at home. As an optional prayer, those at home typically pray alone, but during this Ramadan male relatives of age took turns leading *taraweeh* at home, and an educated elder gave short lectures and led discussions with the family. Similar to what customarily takes place at the mosque, an educated elder gave short lectures and led discussions with the family, and everyone socialized over sweets after prayers.

The pre-dawn meal before fasting, *suhoor*, is shared with family members. Muslim males are encouraged to pray *fajr* in congregation at the mosque. Rather than going back to sleep after *fajr* (around 4:15 AM), there are many rewards to be gained if one chooses to sit alone after *fajr* prayer remembering Allah until the sun rises (around 5:45 AM). This typically solitary act done at the mosque was adapted by much of the multi-generational family by reading Quran together as a communal religious activity this Ramadan.

Muslims try to be as charitable as possible to emulate the Prophet (peace be upon him) as he was the most generous during Ramadan. Charitable acts done at home included cooking and baking for other families, tutoring and helping younger relatives with their at-home school work, and teaching others the Quran. In addition, other popular Ramadan activities include reading religious books, singing *nasheeds* (Islamic songs), and making Islamic art (such as Arabic calligraphy and hand-made

Ramadan decorations). Despite the pandemic, this Ramadan saw an outpouring of some of the most creative and festive works, decorations, and gifts the family had seen.

Since mosques closed for the five daily prayers and Friday's congregational weekly prayer, homes transformed into family mosques. The family *imam* led the prayers and the *muadhin*, he who makes the calls to prayer, actively gathered everyone to pray together. While daily prayers are sometimes prayed in congregation on normal days, all five prayers were prayed in congregation this Ramadan, increasing the amount of daily family communal acts despite the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown.

Although the WHO recommended utilizing technology to replace the lack of communal rituals at mosques, it was already customary for Gazans to utilize technology for religious purposes. Gazans regularly watch live streams of prayers from Mecca and Medina and the call to prayer can always be heard over the TV and radio and from mosques' loudspeakers. Additionally, app-based group chat Quranic and Islamic studies have been commonplace for many years, and have only increased in popularity throughout the world during the pandemic. There was no shortage of resources for further religious inspiration or communal learning via technology this Ramadan.

Muslims are generally encouraged to accept invitations from other Muslims, such as those for the *iftar* fast-breaking meal. If one feeds a fasting Muslim, more blessings are bestowed upon them. These two beliefs are part of why Muslims love to host *iftar* gatherings. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, hosting *iftar* was discouraged for extended family or outside guests, so meals were delivered as warm surprises right before the sun set. This Ramadan during the pandemic was unlike typical Ramadans, because immediate multi-generational families were able to gather for *iftar* and *taraweeh* every single night. During typical Ramadans, male family members (approximately half of one's typical family) eat *iftar* at the mosque and extended family's homes, with work colleagues, etc. This made Thursday nights especially memorable. Since Friday is Gaza's weekend, Thursday night is the social evening. Each Thursday, the majority of the family (typically forty-four individuals) would join for a large *iftar* and *taraweeh*. One particular Thursday, one male elder was able to get most of the family to show up, resulting in an *iftar* and *taraweeh* of sixty-two people.

Muslims perform more *ibadah* (acts of worship) in the last ten days of Ramadan while seeking the rewards of *Layal-tul-Qadr* (the Night of Power and Fate), the holiest night in the Islamic faith. Muslim men try to stay in the mosque, giving up worldly affairs during the final ten days and nights of Ramadan. While staying in the mosque to perform *i'tikaf* was impossible this Ramadan, staying up all or most of the nights to perform *ibadah* with family was a wonderful alternative.

Layal-tul-Qadr is most commonly known to be on the twenty-seventh night of Ramadan. On this night, one male elder invited forty-seven family members for *iftar* and *taraweeh*. The evening included multiple religious lectures, supererogatory prayers led by the adult males of that family, *nasheed* performances by children, Quran recitations, religious skits, and plenty of homemade sweets and gifts. While women go to *taraweeh* in Gaza, staying the night at the mosque is not typical, which made this experience more unique and memorable.

A common topic discussed, stressed, and contemplated throughout this Ramadan, which continues to this day, is the importance of maintaining *tawakkul* (trust in Allah). Having *tawakkul* during difficult times enables Muslims to continue to illustrate resilience despite all odds, such as living through a pandemic. Having *tawakkul* meant being adaptive to the typical practices of this sacred month, such as accepting the fact that the most joyous activities of the year could not be experienced as a community at-large. With creativity, many were able to find a surprising amount of joy in spending the entire month with one's own family despite the lockdown and the greater fear of COVID-19.

Stated often in the Quran, reflection is seen as a great act of worship. Reflecting on this past Ramadan, it is clear that Gaza's faith and hope were more infectious than COVID-19. The family was fortunate to find that communal acts can be rewarding when a community is defined as one's own multi-generational family—which epitomizes the practice of first giving charity (one's time, effort, knowledge, resources, money, etc.) to one's family.

The greatest lessons learned are those that one applies to their daily life past isolated events, such as the month of Ramadan, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic continues and lockdowns ensue. More specifically, Gaza announced its first non-quarantined COVID-19 case on August 24, 2020, enforcing its first strict 48-hour stay-at-home order in which all public areas were shut down unlike during Ramadan. Within that time, violence escalated between the Israeli government and Hamas, electricity was limited to four to six hours every twenty-four-hour period, bombings and surveillance increased, and land and water restrictions tightened. Gaza has been in what's known as double-lockdown or double-quarantine, due to the 2007 Israeli-Egyptian blockade and COVID-19. During this outbreak, the family was restricted transit between the two multi-generational family buildings.

While Gaza continues to endure worsening conditions (economically, physically, emotionally, etc.) due to the double-lockdown, *tawwakul* and creative adaptations, especially those of communal acts in Islam, help them move forward and maintain positive mindsets. Learning from Muslims worldwide is a consolidated effort to further fortify our faith as a global community, even if we cannot meet face-to-face in in-person community gatherings.

Katharina Pewny: Accepting Impermanence.

How the use of new technologies makes the teachings of yoga more, and less, accessible.

This report from the Berlin yoga field is informed by my experience as a practitioner and teacher of yoga over the age of 50. I started to teach yoga in the fall of 2019 and now work with people (mainly women) who experience chronic illnesses such as rheumatic and asthmatic conditions, fibromyalgia, post-cancer conditions, and others. This work allows me to witness the beauty of the diversity of human bodies and to constantly invent variations of poses and movements. I know my students as experts of their bodies: they teach me their way of moving in, or through, a pose. At the moment, I teach at a community center in Berlin, a privately-run space, and I give workshops for disabled peoples' organisations. I do not teach at yoga studios, as I did not find a studio that is fully accessible for wheelchair users, as many have problems such as exquisite wooden floors, lack of toilets and overly narrow doors.

This is a symptom of the contemporary commodification of yoga in the global North: Yoga is today presented and sold as a fitness-oriented physical practice and therefore either unwelcoming or inaccessible to people who are not young, slim, fit and white: Seniors, fat people, people with health conditions and disabilities, people of color, and others such as traumatized humans are effectively excluded from yogic practice. In most forms of yoga teacher training, modifications of poses and precautions in case of pregnancy, high blood pressure, or other frequently occurring bodily states are taught, whereas the teaching of yoga for disabled people is mostly not addressed. However, there are many BIPOC, queer, disabled, and other marginalized yogi*nis who build organisations and networks that both specifically address disabled people, seniors, traumatized practitioners, queer people and other marginalized groups and also work to increase the accessibility of yoga by educating themselves in equity in yoga teaching, in trauma-awareness, in the modifications of poses, and in building accessible yoga studios. Especially in the past months, in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movements, social justice and individual and collective responsibility, both on and off the mat, are widely discussed and practiced.

In the following, I report from the Accessible Yoga (AY) community, a vital and worldwide network of teachers and practitioners of this more accessible and inclusive form of yoga. In the social media group, found at <http://accessibleyoga.org>, 8400 members exchange their experiences. In March 2020, my colleague Katja Sandschneider and I re-activated an informal network of accessible yoga teachers in Berlin for regular exchange, and our first topics were the pedagogies of online teaching. In this group, as in other international AY communities, the core question we faced was: Does the use of streaming technologies make yoga more, or less, accessible for people with disabilities/chronic illnesses, for seniors and all others commonly excluded from what is known as yoga today?

The exchanges basically came down to these two facts: Online yoga classes exclude people who do not have access to the necessary technologies and the means to use them, for whatever reason. If the visual elements of the class are not interpreted for blind people, and if the sounds are not interpreted for deaf people, the streaming classes exclude these populations. In addition, most residential homes are not equipped with streaming technologies. In these contexts, the residents have not been able to participate in their yoga classes for the past half year. Some creative solutions, such as the audio description of classes via WhatsApp or telephone, have been found; however, most of these require assistance for most practitioners. Self-agency and empowerment are known effects of regular yoga practice, and the more people are dependent on assistants, the more self-agency is again reduced.

As I write this report in July 2020, and after the decline of the first wave of COVID-19 in Germany, some classes are taking place in some institutions' gardens during the summer time, at least in Berlin, where the infection numbers and death rates are comparatively low. Most yoga studios are again open, and many teachers offer hybrid classes; that is, they teach simultaneously in their usual location and stream the classes online. This is crucial, especially for accessible yoga, as for many yogin*is online classes are *more* accessible than live classes, not only, but especially during the pandemic: People can practice at home and do not need to travel with public transportation or transport assistance. Most – nearly all – yoga studios materially exclude wheel chair-users, and countless other practices such as the burning of incense and “gender-neutral” changing rooms can make people physically (allergies

towards incense) and psychically (sexual trauma) unwell. The possibility to practice in the safety of their own space (if their home space is safe) can be of high importance to practitioners, as well as the choice to switch their camera on or off—that is, to be seen, or not, by the community.

The teachings of yoga are the visible side of that profession. But the economic side of the profession is less commonly seen; that is, the precarity of yoga teachers' working situations. To what extent has the pandemic changed the professional landscape for yoga teachers?

Most teachers lost their primary source of income immediately, and quickly started to educate themselves about online teaching. Hand in hand with the lockdown there was an incredible surge of free classes and support offered both by and for yoga teachers. I participated in a number of free training sessions about online teaching, about the streaming of classes, about for the facilitation of online yoga communities. Yoga teachers trained in public relations and social media management generously offered support to others less experienced, and the mantra "Perfection is not your friend in this situation" served as a key guideline through webinars and chats. A culture of mutual support and exchange – again in online meetings among teachers – blossomed in March and April 2020. The city of Berlin offered public funding for freelancers and small businesses that allowed many yoga teachers to survive, though others (such as new teachers and those without EU passports) were not eligible for this support. Some small studios had to close due to the lack of income after a couple of months. All teachers I know spent countless hours of unpaid work on the day-to-day-management of class schedules to reflect the changing circumstances of the regulations for sport offerings, the weather (in case of outdoor classes), and their own and their students' health conditions.

Some teachers immediately put their businesses online while others, especially in the first weeks of the pandemic, withdraw from daily tasks and even more firmly implemented meditation and restorative practices in their daily routines. Some yoga teachers, artists and other precarious bodyworkers accepted the first weeks of the lockdown as kind of "retreat" and used the free time (otherwise so rare) to reflect more deeply on themselves and the state of the world, and to refresh their meditation practices. Both privately and as valuable commodity, both the teaching and practice of meditation blossomed during the pandemic, mainly as a means to calm the mind and ease pandemic-related anxieties.

Meditation can help yoga practitioners to dis-identify with the current state of their bodies – and therefore also of their minds– and to become aware of the fact that our perceptions usually are *interpretations of what we perceive as reality*. Meditation practices, both in Buddhist and Hinduist lineages (despite all the differences of Buddhism and Hinduism) are meant to increase our awareness of interpretations of given reality, what the psychoanalytic tradition terms the "unconscious". By differentiating the here and now from traces from the past, practitioners can learn to see more clearly see what is present and accept it as given reality. In the Buddhist view, this reality is an everchanging web of inter-relations, for as time passes, nothing will stay the same and, by accepting impermanence as given, practitioners can train themselves not to dwell on what is lost: " If we learn to look at a flower in a way that impermanence is revealed to us, when it dies, we will not suffer, Impermanence is more than an idea. It helps us to touch reality." (Hanh 1998: 131)

Here in Berlin, the health system is stable, developed and accessible, and COVID-19 infection and death rates were very low until autumn 2020, both compared to other places. This field report is informed by what my students teach me and by what I find in the various local and international yoga teachers' networks that I, as a yoga teacher with recurring health issues, am part of. These are: the worldwide network of Accessible Yoga teachers, at accessibleyoga.org, a network of senior yoga teachers in Germany and a network of local independent yoga teachers in Berlin.

Keeping the Door of the Cathedral Open:

The Case of the Lund Cathedral in the Lutheran Church of Sweden

Interview with Senior Chaplain Dr Lena Sjöstrand

by Dr Kim Skjoldager-Nielsen

(This interview has been translated from the Swedish by Dr Skjoldager-Nielsen, and lightly edited for length and clarity.)

Kim Skjoldager-Nielsen: I would like to ask you Lena, if you could please start by briefly describing your congregation of Lund Cathedral?

Lena Sjöstrand: Yes, Lund is a small very old university town in Southern Sweden, and the cathedral is in the very center of the town. We have a core congregation of people coming there often. We have another circle of people coming now and then. We have newcomers, and people we will only see once. It is a place where some people come for a short while. Some are students, and some visitors stay for longer time. We are trying to work as a congregation very much with the cathedral as the center. We usually say that the cathedral is our best colleague. We work together with the cathedral building. When we meet, everything we do is related to the cathedral. The services are very much in focus of what we do. We have a profile according to which we work with culture, art, and theater.

KSN: You also have a visitors' center that you built some years ago, because you have a lot of tourists coming. At least normally. I suppose during the pandemic this has changed.

LS: Yes, that is true. We do not have that many people visiting now. Usually, we have around 700,000 visits each year. Some years ago, we realized that we really needed a place close to the cathedral where people could gather and we could give them some more information about the Cathedral. They could have a cup of coffee and visit the bookshop and things like that, and then we could bring them into the cathedral in smaller groups. In that way we now have very modern facilities.

From the beginning, it was meant to be only a visitors' center. But now the center is on the ground level, and we have offices for people working in the cathedral on the second floor. And that has turned out very well because we can mingle and gather, and we are not separated from visitors who come to visit the cathedral out of cultural, historical, or tourist interests.

KSN: Perhaps you could describe the cathedral for the readers to give them an idea of the cathedral itself.

LS: It is considered one of the most beautiful cathedral in Sweden. It is a medieval building in Romanesque style. The oldest part is the crypt situated under the most important part of the church, the east or high altar. This part and the crypt were consecrated in 1123.

The cathedral was presumably first established in the 1090's or around that time as a gift from the king. It might be there even was a church here before that point. But what is of importance is that this history is something that we build on today. We like the image that churches are not finished at once. Generations of new people come and continue building the cathedral in a spiritual way. We also are assisted in this imagery by one of the sculptures in the oldest part of the church: the giant Finn. Nobody knows exactly who this sculpture represents, but legend has it that Finn tried to curse the church saying it will never ever be finished. As it turned out it was a blessing.

The atmosphere of the cathedral is very light as it is built from sandstone. In accordance with Protestantism, there very few images, but a lot of small sculptures and gray engravings and things like that. Above the high altar there is a large colorful mosaic from 1927 made by Danish artist Joakim Skovgaard, which is a striking image of the Second Coming of Christ. This image gives an iconic identity to the otherwise quite clean church interior.

KSN: Alright, if we then turn to the situation that we are currently in and have been now for quite some time, the COVID-19 pandemic, I would like to ask you what specific measures you have taken to reduce the spread in the cathedral and in the congregation?

LS: First of all, since it is a large space it has been possible for us to keep the cathedral open throughout the pandemic, and we are very happy and grateful that we did not have to close the doors. The open cathedral has sent a very strong and hopeful signal to the surrounding community since the cathedral is considered the heart of the city. To keep it open is most important to us, and we have continuously celebrated services. We have not been celebrating Mass at noon during weekdays as we usually do, instead we have done a midday prayer.

Following the restrictions instated by the health authorities, we have been counting the visitors and we decided very quickly that the limit of 50 people for public gatherings means 50 in the cathedral as a whole and that was approved by the bishop. Obviously, this meant we had to stand in the doorway and count people. During summer we had an extra person just counting people all day. Of course, we also have upheld social distancing in the pews to avoid people sitting too close. When it comes to Sunday Mass, we had quite a long period when we did not distribute bread and wine. We have just had the priest do a representative Eucharist on behalf of the congregation.

We now have started again to hand out bread, as a sacrament under the bread, and we have done that all the time during weekly services. But in the high mass on Sunday morning, we found it a bit difficult because we don't know the congregation with new people coming. There has been a longing, of course, to receive the full sacrament, and we are happy that we now can provide that again, although with some worries. Of course, we do it with precautions.

Distributing the Eucharist, one could say that we as priests have been reviving an old liturgical practice of washing hands before going to the altar. Of course, we also have had disinfection liquid for the congregation. In the beginning the priests were a little bit shy with this, but now I have noticed that I myself and my colleagues are doing the cleaning somewhat more heightened so it becomes more ritual and I think that is quite nice and interesting. I am thinking of what happens in rituals when you start doing something perhaps for a practical reason that you then interpret, and you do it over and over again in the ritual and it becomes a heightened act that can carry more meanings than it had at the first.

KSN: that is very interesting. Could you tell us a little bit more about how you did the representative Eucharist?

LS: It was only the celebrant who received bread and wine, and we really lifted up the bread and chalice to make it visible to all. This is quite a controversial matter and controversial act to do [in practical Protestantism]. We had a lot of reactions, but we legitimated it with reference to Lutheran theology and knowledge in this area that helped us realize that this practice is permissible. The three main parts in the Lutheran Eucharistic Theology are to see, to hear, and receive. And now in a period of crisis, we could still see and hear but we could not receive, that was how we argued.

KSN: Now that you include the full Eucharist again in the high mass, in practical terms, how do you manage that? Is it done the same way as usual that you go to the altar?

LS: No, we have three different places in the church that priests go to with the bread and wine. Then the congregation comes up to receive the sacrament. The priest gives exact information and strict instructions telling people who can move up the aisle and go back on the other side, and that you should take your time and keep the distance.

In the beginning we allowed people to dip the bread in the chalice themselves but then often also the fingers got in and we got really worried. We have learned a lot during this last month, since we started. It has been a common learning process both for the priests and the congregation. We have been talking a lot. We have been rehearsing, and we have given one another feedback.

One more thing that has changed in the services, is that we do not give the greeting of peace physically any longer. We greet each other verbally over a distance. It feels strange, but it works.

KSN: Is there anything else that you have changed that we have not touched upon already that you come to think of it?

LS: On Good Friday, on Easter Night, and Easter Day, and on some other occasions we have had streaming of rituals done by a professional film team. At other times we have just used one camera and one of the regular staff who was in charge of filming and streaming. On every Monday and Friday, we transmit a very short morning prayer from the Crypt, and that has really been interesting in terms of attendance. On a regular basis we have more than 600 people watching them.

KSN: Finally, I would like to ask you about the churchplay, how it went this year. It was its 60th anniversary. But maybe first you could say just a little bit about what the churchplay is. It is considered something quite extraordinary and quite important for Lund Cathedral.

LS: Briefly, it is a mass that combines liturgy with theater. The roots go back to Benedictine liturgy around 900 AD or something like that. It sprang out of the celebration of the Mass on Easter Morning. In Sweden, it was revived in the 1950's in a town called Sigtun, a quite close to Stockholm. The priest and author Olov Hartman collaborated with a schoolteacher and autodidact director Tuve Nyström on developing a contemporary form of liturgical drama, which came to be known as churchplay (in Swedish *kyrkospel*).

A lot of churchplays were made during the 1950's and 60's. Soon, in 1960, what was now considered a "genre" spread to Lund on the initiative of the actress Birgitta Hellerstedt, and her husband, who was a pastor in the cathedral. In the beginning they were not allowed to do the churchplay in the cathedral but after a couple of years, the plays moved into the cathedral space, and since then it has been a regular event nearly every year. Different performances each year, in the sense it would be different dramatic texts, either original or adapted, and different musical compositions, and so on.

What connects the plays with one another is that they are an integral part of the liturgy of the mass and the church space. The altar's meaning and function as an altar is kept and the church is not made into a theater, using scenography to create illusion or another world. Thus, the play is made for the church and as integral actions blending in and following movements of the liturgy.

Of course, it has looked very different. It has had different directors, actors, dancers, musicians, and celebrants, and it have had different themes and gone through some periods of orientation, e.g. the political in the 70's, the mythical in the 80's, and the authentic in 90's. We have not worn just anything but mostly the celebratory alb. Sometimes the play has been more to the theater side with costumes, and using symbolic things but distilled at the ground.

This year I was not involved practically in the in the play, as I have been other years. It was a play called *Prayer for the Earth*, and it was made with quite a big group of churchplayers. To work with a big group has been a longing for quite a long time. Unfortunately, we became a big group of 18 this year which for obvious reasons made it difficult under the restrictions of 50 in a public gathering. Including church wardens, we could accommodate 32 congregants in the event. So that was a kind of problem limiting the number of attendees on the jubilee year.

They had started out with a play with a focus on climate change and related problems, and then COVID-19 came. In response they integrated questions about the pandemic illness and how scared one could be of the illness, and death and things like that. Emotions or experiences that are brought up by the climate crisis and this pandemic could be very close to one another. It was quite easy to bring in what happened in the world around them, and I think that was very important.

The group consisted of people who are working with drama in school, and they were young and middle-aged people. And they were also collaborating with some younger professional singers and also a group of upper-school students. For me, it was worrying because I thought of this very group of people and all restrictions, of course.

How should we handle this? How could it work in a good way? But it worked and there were two leaders that took care of upholding the rules of social distancing and so on.

For most of the 60 years the churchplay was integrated in a mass, but this year it was a prayer service so the play part of the liturgy went into quite a long intercession. I think that was a good solution to the absence of the Eucharist. We talked quite a lot about it, but I think it was a good solution.

KSN: I think that is quite amazing that you were able to go through with such a big project under the given circumstances. I do not know if I can say that you could not have chosen a better theme. It certainly addressed the whole situation we are in. I mean, COVID-19 can be considered a symptom of the greater ecological and spiritual crisis; I think all of these matters are interconnected; you cannot really take them apart. Currently, there is a tendency by the media and all of us to focus on COVID-19, only. As if it was one thing really. It is much more than that.

LS: What happened the first weeks was sudden silence and concentration and seriousness in the atmosphere in the Cathedral. It really was a big issue for us because this all started around lament, around Lent and Good Friday. It was quite easy to find a relationship between what is happening around us and in us and what we are doing in church. Especially when Easter Day came, we noticed this ambiguity of darkness and light brought together. Usually, we have big candles and a very happy service. We could not have that since we could not have that many people. And we really went through all the Easter hymns and discussed with one another, can we really sing this this one or must we have another that is not so overtly happy. We did not have a brass ensemble as we usually have; we really became careful about details.

Of course, the most sensitive part was doing Easter. I think, we managed to praise the Lord.

It is of utmost importance to carefully think through what kind of signal in terms of staging you send and what kind of music you use in order to create the right atmospheric response to the sentiments of people, because the atmosphere is such a strong element in that. In that sense, the perspective of the theater scholar is very useful.

You should address the clenched feelings to avoid the impression the doors of the cathedral are closed, not physically, but in a spiritual way. Yes, so the choice of the churchplay's theme was fortunate, in the sense it reflected how in an overall way the Cathedral created that liturgical space for all people to come into and share their concerns and their anxiety for the future.

KSN: Maybe this a good note to end on. On behalf of *PRS* and our readers, I would like to thank you very much for spending your time to talk with me.

Maysa Utairat: Performing *Rebirth and Death* Online

Young Performers and Audiences Adjusting to the Pandemic in Thailand

(The full version of this contribution includes video. This reduced-size file only includes photographs..)

Rebirth and Death is a theatre play written by Nikorn Sae-Tang, a modern theatre artist based in Thailand. This play tells the story of souls who endlessly journey in a cycle of death and rebirth. The free will of the main character, who searches for an exit from the cycle during the space in-between death and rebirth, drew the attention of young theatre practitioners—dramatic arts students—at Mahasarakham University (MSU), in the northeast of Thailand. They then decided to perform it in the secular space of a theatrical studio. The Buddhist concept of Rebirth is linked to the idea of the temporary nature of life. One life may emerge in another through rebirth without a permanent entity. The stream of karmic energy will be transferred into the new form of being, which will collect fresh karma during its existence. The play is focussed on the in-between stage—the space between death and rebirth—before the transition that leads back to life in a new form. In Sae-Tang’s play, when the souls arrive in the space between death and rebirth, they find an old lady that continuously serves cups of tea. The tea renews the souls, enabling them to forget their previous lives and the attached feelings; the entity of the latest life before rebirth. One soul refuses to drink the tea and questions the cycle of rebirth, which seems unreasonable to it. This soul has an experimental journey whereby it will live its following lives while keeping all the memories from its past ones, aiming to find a path to a new exit. The old lady and the other souls challenge the main character as soon as he states its determination to experiment with the cycle of rebirth. The soul goes through numerous rebirths, aiming at either greater or lesser goals in each rebirth, hoping to discover the meaning of the path. The recurrence of rebirths convinces the soul to accept the impermanence of his existence; however, he reaches further for the unknown path, exiting the cycle of rebirth.

The play was intended to be performed live in the MSU theatre studio on 27 March 2020; however, when the COVID-19 pandemic reached MSU, the administration team immediately announced a first a four-day closure (17-20 March) and then a complete end to the semester on 24 March, a full month before normal term time, in compliance with the Thai Ministry of Higher Education’s COVID-19 containment policy. The theatre studio was shut down, the finished props and set were abandoned, and the production team was required to only communicate online from home, and forbidden to rehearse or perform in person for any audience members. The Thai government announced a state of emergency in those provinces that showed a high COVID-19 risk and strongly restricted all travel between provinces. The production team members left their university accommodation for their hometowns. I caught the last flight to Bangkok before all airlines stopped flying. Feelings of confusion and disappointment for the uncertain future of the performance were shared via online Zoom meetings, with all performers keeping their fingers crossed that the pandemic and the governmental restrictions would soon be over.

Before the pandemic, I was involved as a co-creator of the project and, during the pandemic, I created pre- and post- performance online activities aimed at enabling the audience members to become more engaged in the online performance when they would watch the play in private. These activities were intended to offer an opportunity to react to the conflict in the play between forgetting all identity and moving on to rebirth or preserving it. The audience were invited to record three-minute clips of themselves on their mobile phones before and after watching four 20-minute scenes online from home. They were then encouraged to send the recordings of their reactions to me. In August 2020, I collected the reactions sent in by the audience members—

with their permission— and then I planned to re-record a performance of the audience members' reactions in the studio with costumes and lighting; this would generate a new performance that would be uploaded online in October 2020. This report draws on that work, as well as personal conversations with the director and performers.

Prior to the pandemic, Ong (my collaborator), the director of the play, had questioned the significance of rebirth. Joe (my collaborator), a performer, had become deeply involved in the struggle of his character, who repetitively went through rebirth, searching for a meaning and an exit. Joe's character was conflicted about whether to drink the tea and forget all of their previous identities or refuse it and preserve all their memories of happiness, suffering, and torture in hell—i.e., the lower realms of existence related to the karma of an individual's past lives—while seeking an exit from the cycle. Earlier in the rehearsal, the performers had focussed on portraying the souls that were facing the undeniable continuity of death and rebirth, playing their characters according to the script and asking few questions. The director and the performers had put aside their resistance towards rebirth; however, during the pandemic, they revealed the sense of wonder they had felt when performing. Before the pandemic, when the players performed the repetitive cycle of death and rebirth, they sought a connection with their characters' condition based on their self. The performers had portrayed their characters with the Stanislavski method by asking themselves, "What would I do if I were in this situation?" The performers placed themselves in the characters' situation in order to react to it according to the play's context.

The pandemic had forced the production to move beyond the stage, and the performers faced the loneliness of the lack of in-person interaction. Via recorded video, the group and I divided the performance into four scenes, each of which was recorded in one take, with little editing. These scenes were filmed in a number of different locations, each chosen by the performer—an open-air theatre, a rice paddy, and the performers' apartments—and then put together. On a small grassy hill outside the open air theatre, the old lady character served the tea to a soul in isolation, recorded by means of an iPad, without an audience and only occasionally seen by people due to the social distancing policy. The director expected to create the feelings of the space between death and rebirth for the performers to identify with their characters. The



open-air theatre at the MSU was an outdoor stage surrounded by an amphitheatre of audience seats rising on the sides of a hill, surrounded by a green grass, large trees, strong winds, and a bright sky.

The setting, which had emerged from the performers' imagination in the empty studio, had been transferred to the open-air space, bringing fresh feelings and new blocking to the performers.



The entrance to a corridor between two high walls at the open-air theatre had become the in-between space for the souls. The performers experienced the transitional feelings of the souls who were walking into the unknown as they walked along the corridor and thus continued to search for movement at the location. The souls climbed the pillar of the stage at the open-air theatre as if they were floating.

The performers reacted strongly to the condition of the characters when they recorded their outdoor performance. Joe had taken his character's questioning of the path of



death and rebirth seriously in the studio, but he put on an enraged expression while he stood against the strong wind that was blowing across the rice paddy.

The performers felt the dynamic of the environment with their bodies and transferred it to the dialogue in the script. When the players recorded their performances in their apartments, they personally chose the locations within their homes for their characters' actions, matching their feelings with their characters' dialogues in their bedrooms, bathrooms, and closets.

Wave (my collaborator), a performer, had fluently played the complex interpretation of his character in the studio, but was reluctant when faced with the recording application: he only saw himself singing on the computer screen, rather than the devastated expression of his character. Wave's character passed through many rebirths by keeping all his memories and attached feelings; at one point, that seemed to be unbearable. The character sang with heart-broken feelings. Wave solved this by synchronizing the feelings of the previous and present lives of his character while expressing them through his singing, thus feeling the continuity of the character's past lives. Wave felt empathy towards the character's past lives when he sang. He narrated



the feelings of the characters through his singing, motivated by confronting the conflicts of the characters with his self.

After the play, he said he believed to have understood how the characters felt while they lived each life through many rebirths. Wave believed in the rebirth of the soul; therefore, he intended to represent the sacredness of rebirth. He thought that the atmosphere of the theatre, its liveness may excite his encounter with the audience and that the interaction between the characters he performed and the others would be more intense. The audience could understand rebirth through the atmosphere on stage: the lighting and the continuity of each scene. However, Wave claimed that the privately recorded performance afforded him intense concentration with himself. Although, according to the director and the performers, the continuity of the scenes and the liveness were missing, the direct experience of the interaction between the performers' self and the characters' conflict was actively developed.

The questions of death and rebirth and the characters' choices were transferred to the recorded version of the play. Guz (my collaborator), a performer, was conflicted

by the Buddhist concept of Karma, writing: “When a person is in trouble, why is his or her birth supposed to serve past karma, especially through suffering?” After performing the play, Guz reflected that, like her character, she did not know where she would go after death, as the existence of heaven and hell were in question; the cycle of rebirth and death should be upon an individual’s imagination; “Each person should be able to choose the path and decide the direction”. Guz reflected how she felt out of control when she interpreted the concept that all misfortune in her present life was the result of the karma in her past ones. She interacted with the journey of her character as an opportunity to prove that individuals may take ownership of their choices of actions and decide and choose their paths, as the main character did. For a moment, she re-considered that individuals may choose their paths over the realms of existence that may be in one’s imagination: the authority was thus transferred back from the sacred concept of rebirth to the person making the decisions.

This moment did not appear in the studio, but it did in her interpretation of the characters in the outdoor space during the pandemic. In the scene, the director was convinced by the journey of one of the main characters, “To live the life you are given and make it worthwhile is what matters”. Joe, a performer, also saw birth and death as an unavoidable phenomenon; however, he believed that death may encourage a person to contribute to society despite his or her awareness of the inevitability of death. The outdoor space highlighted the individual decisions of the performers, as they were freed from the authority of the play’s script and of the studio space at the educational institution. The script offered a path for life after death, representing the well-known beliefs that were generally praised as sacred concepts by the Thai participants in the play, which had been rehearsed in a studio space decorated with statues of Buddha and with the sacred masks of the characters in the Thai literature that are worshipped every year with big celebratory events. The performers normally made gestures of respect when they entered and while they remained in the room; this may have influenced how they reacted to the sacred concept of rebirth in the script and how they revealed their personal questions towards such concept. The performers and the director explored the neutral outdoor space where they made the individual’s choice of actions and created the secular meaning of cycle of life: birth and death.

Due to the social distancing policy, the production team members uploaded the performance in April 2020, and it was first watched online in July 2020. I offered my online pre- and post- performance activities to 60 audience members, who willingly played with the dilemma posed by the performance. The reactions of the performers when they played their characters, and their reactions towards rebirth and death motivated me to transfer the scenario of the characters to an engagement opportunity for audience members to play with the choice of path for themselves. Audience members were offered the choice to either drink the tea and forget the past, or not drink it and keep all of their memories on the path to rebirth. The scenario would be presented online so that the audience members could individually react to the condition while recording three-minute clips in which they performed a character privately at home both before and after they had watched the streaming play. Before the audience had watched the play, they focussed on getting into the situation, and then briefly reacted to the offered condition. The audience members convinced themselves to become a character by realizing that they were souls interacting with the tea lady who offered them tea.

The audience members expressed their reasons for either drinking or not drinking the tea: in an interview, an audience member told me that I wouldn't want to get stuck with the old things; I should take action in the next life even if I could not resist birth and death. They took the condition personally; clearly paused to search for memories related to persons in real life. Kumnuan said, in a stressed tone, 'If I stay here, my friends, my love, and my family may have already forgotten me but, when I am reborn, I may forget them'. The audience members actively owned their decision-making in their clips, and expressed their doubts towards rebirth or negotiated whether or not to lose (the memories of) self in order to be reborn. The religious concept of rebirth became more secular when placed in the negotiable scenario in the play: the decision making moment—whether to accept the path, drink the tea, and forget the self to be rebirth, or to preserve the memories and move on to be reborn or refuse to be—offered the audience members the authority to directly encounter the concept of rebirth and to choose their immediate interaction towards it. I refer to 'secular' in reference to a way that is less focussed on superstition: in this case, the moral judgement of a person's actions in life, as a result of karma, after death. 'Secular' has a meaning that relates instead to the present moment in a person's life, as the flexible approach of an individual person, dealing with life's conflicts and searching for an exit of the mind. It is an individual's adopted approach to aligning the existence of the self with the choice of being selfless.

After watching the play via online streaming, the audience members briefly interacted with the tea lady and directly engaged with the character's choices; however, they replaced the characters' decisions with their own. An audience member portrayed a male character who was singing and losing his mind in the play; however, she made the opposite decision to the character. Another audience member used the character's reason to support her own decision, "I would like to create new memories, I don't want to get burdened by the past". The response became intense when the audience members decided to transition between death and rebirth. An audience member considered his past in silence for a long time, while another expressed her decision firmly, "Bring me the tea, I will be reborn and meet better things". The audience members took their time to feel the transition to a new beginning when they drank the tea: "This is it, the new beginning". Chanavit felt the moment after he had drunk the tea: "I wanted to erase my past mistakes". When the audience members chose whether or not to forget the self, the transition from the moment of leaving one's memories to that of entering a new life became the audience members' key action, a short moment during which they could chose the liberating moment. However there was one audience member who tasted the tea to test the feeling of leaving past memories and a few who were worried about losing their sense of self if they lost their memories. A few audience members postponed their decision and negotiated either with the tea lady or with themselves: they re-worked the challenge as a debate with the self. An audience member improvised the voice of an angel to interact with himself, offering reasons to choose the path. Another improvised his response with a lively backing track and another googled and played sound effects from an application with her performance. The sound effects used by the audience members made the inevitable feelings elicited in reaction to the sacred concept of rebirth lighter and more playful. Like the play, the pre- and post-show activities were experienced privately online, so the audience members mainly focussed on their reactions and choices towards rebirth as themselves or with the characters. The pre-and post- performance

activities offered a space in which the audience members could explore and express their reactions freely towards the choices of the characters. The privacy of recording the clip in personal home spaces, in a secular environment, served to distribute out the authority attached to the religious concept of rebirth between the audience members and the performers, who played with the scenario of the play and were able to express their reactions with their own interpretation of the concept.

The rebirth and death in the play, which had been explored in the secular atmosphere of the theatre studio, were re-created online as an adjustment to the pandemic. In the process, the meaning of rebirth and death developed with the interaction of the audience members towards the condition of the play. The audience members created the characters from their imagination before seeing the play, chose the direction of their choices and were able to either alter their decision or continue along the path with the characters after they had seen the play. In this case, the meaning of the rebirth was re-generated through the interactions of individuals, who used the self to experience the choices of the characters and dealt with the concept of rebirth before they saw the character's choices in the play. After the play had ended, the meaning of rebirth and death may have become more secular for individuals, enabling them to defy the meaning and to play with it further, as they had during the play. The authority of the sacred concept of rebirth became more approachable when the choices related to it—which used to fall outside the scope of an individual's decision making—became negotiable or even deniable in the play. The unknown path was still undiscovered and flexible for a soul that may search for its own exit. The authority of the sacredness of rebirth was transferred to the individuals, who thus owned the decision making and the flexible path to be taken to search for the exit; the meaning of the rebirth then became more secular. The audience members shared their experiences with the main characters who were negotiating with a sacred concept that seemed to be unspeakable, unavoidable, or too sacred to be doubted. The privacy of the recording and the location offered a free space in which the performers and the audience members could express their individual interactions towards the concept of rebirth. Playing the sacred concept of rebirth in a secular environment online may have lightened the religious authority that influenced the performers' and the audience members' choices of expression towards rebirth in the collective environment of the public space. In December 2020, the clips recorded by ten audience members during the pandemic will be re-created by the audience members in the MSU Theatre studio stage; the personal choices of expression they had made in private and the re-generated meaning of rebirth will once again live in the collective environment of the public space. The project was aimed at exploring a secular concept of Buddhism on stage, releasing questions on rebirth through expressions of inquiry of its sacredness: the conflict of the present life, which relates to the authority of rebirth and death and to the approaches adopted by an individual in order to align the self to the concept and to react to its authority.

Tina Weiss: Observations and Reactions within the Orthodox Jewish Community to COVID-19

A window into the lives of Orthodox Jews across the globe indicate that day-to-day reality has changed within the tight-knit community, from the shuttering of synagogues, introduction of remote education and the adaptation of celebrations since the outbreak

of COVID-19. The Jewish religious norms and observances were challenged, reconceived and in some cases drastically altered, all while hopeful for the speedy return to the pre-COVID-19 life. Some elements of religious life – whether access to certified kosher food through normal channels and days that had previously been punctuated with communal prayer services – quickly changed to meet the new needs of life with COVID-19. The cohesiveness of a diverse global community highlight a generally tightly woven community that cares for one another and works to provide for the needs of community members in the best and worst circumstances.

Orthodox Jewish living is anchored from cradle to grave by both communal Jewish life as well as home life. Such a life includes a calendar often dotted with events such as Sabbath and holiday meals shared with friends or family, Bar Mitzvah celebrations, weddings that include festive meals for the post-wedding week in honor of the new couple, synagogue services that often conclude with a light meal shared by worshippers post-prayer service that creates a sense of unity and fellowship among worshippers and community members. And then it is all gone. The daily prayer services with a quorum – gone. Synagogue doors locked. Some synagogues took a preemptive approach in concert with organizations such as the Orthodox Union and closed as they saw and learned early on about local virus cases, while others continued with prayer services until a later date and closed when the local and state government officials declared that gatherings, such as those in houses of worship were to cease – and yet, there were some that attempted to find other means to hold prayer services – whether outside or in non-synagogue locations.

With legislation and guidance speedily implemented in the New York City area in late March that aimed to shutter houses of worship in an effort to reduce the spread of the virus, many synagogues quickly closed while others began outdoor prayer services on porches or backyards and yet others attempted to resist closing and risked facing being closed by local authorities in an effort to curb the spread of the virus. Simultaneously, religious organizations such the Orthodox Union (the US-based organization that represents rabbinic leadership, synagogues, youth programming and kosher certification), created guidance for the member synagogue congregations, whereby addressing the situation in consultation with their rabbinic leaders as well as with medical experts to guide congregations and religious leadership through the challenging period. The immediate pivot and was particularly jarring in communities that recall that the last closure of synagogue doors to communal prayer or study of religious texts may have been during World War II.

The experiences and changes within the Orthodox Jewish community were particularly challenging to communal norms, such as in-person prayer with the reading of the Torah scroll that can only be conducted with a prayer quorum of at least ten men, a specificity within Orthodox congregations. While in recent years many synagogues have taken safety precautions by engaging security officials or local police for added protection, COVID-19 is something that the communal structure had not planned for and was not necessarily ready to take on – but it since has, with great care and understanding, taken on the purpose of connecting individuals that may be socially distant, but need the intellectual and communal connections that are interwoven into their lives. Especially for those that may be considered marginal in some circumstances, such as those with disabilities or health concerns, elements of the Jewish community shone bright by working to ensure that individuals would have the care and necessities needed to continue to live, such as the New York City-based soup

kitchen and food pantry network, Masbia which provides such needs to the Jewish community and beyond. The concept of caring and looking out for one another is a core element within the Orthodox Jewish community.

In early March, the communal joyous observance of the holiday of Purim (observed on the night of March 9 and day of March 10 this year) when the Scroll of Esther is read publicly with cantillation, gifts of food, donations for the poor and a festive meal is hosted at the conclusion of the holiday, mostly continued as it would have any other year. The Purim holiday is usually replete with celebrations in the synagogue as well as with family and social gatherings, levels of frivolity and joy, costumed children and adults. Most of these elements were toned down or completely canceled in many communities in March 2020, but most especially in those places that had already been affected by Coronavirus, such as the Young Israel community of New Rochelle in the suburbs outside of New York City which had some of the earliest known cases in the New York area. At this point some synagogue communities had already made suggestions to reduce density within synagogue buildings, yet this was very early within the COVID-19 pandemic's spread within United States and within the New York metropolitan area and such techniques to reduce the disease's spread of the were less widely known.

Within weeks of the first known cases in the New York area, many daily routines were upended – many synagogues were closed for services with others following suit soon thereafter. Schools, organizations and social service programming for the elderly and vulnerable such as the Moriah Center in Upper Manhattan were closed, so that meals needed to be distributed by volunteers going door-to-door, as the in-person programming and meals for seniors were canceled. In short order, rabbinic leaders and synagogue lay leaders made arduous decisions during the period and sought ways to connect with congregants. Some communities attempted to keep their synagogues open as long as possible, especially considering that the action of closing of synagogues could be devastating to the spiritual lives of the worshippers and is often a lifeline and a place to connect with others and to some, especially singles and seniors, a place for camaraderie and perhaps the only other face one might see. Some synagogue communities considered the religious needs and sensibilities of their congregants, as well as consulted and considered medical guidance and chose to close their synagogues to communal prayer prior to local authorities requested or required the closure of such spaces.

The overarching and guiding principle for many religious leaders within the Jewish community is that of saving a life – such that saving a life can override the observances of the Sabbath and other religious observances, as well as the biblical command “*V'nishmartem me'od l'nafshoteichem*” (Deuteronomy 4:15) that one should guard one's health. As evidence mounted of the devastating potential effects of COVID-19, religious leadership made sweeping moves to curtail and then end public prayer services within synagogues. This was not without certain unique challenges to the Orthodox Jewish community. Virtual prayer services were not possible on the Sabbath, but creativity came into play in many congregations including Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun and those affiliated with United Synagogue with the use of pre-Sabbath services, while at the same time providing for new opportunities for connection between community members, albeit within a socially distant framework.

While Jewish communities, even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, have used technological means to connect with congregants, in particular the Sabbath would

provide a significant challenge, as Orthodox Jews generally disconnect from the outside world during that weekly period (that is, living the twenty-five hours of each weekly Sabbath without the outside distractions of mass media, internet, phone, radio, TV, etc.) aside from emergency situations. In order to connect during the weekdays, many synagogues employed the use of Zoom or similar for prayer services, although some of the tradition accompaniments such as the reading of the Torah scroll were omitted, as there are Jewish legal discussions as to whether a prayer quorum could officially convene via video conferencing technology, as opposed to being within the same room. While those in the Reform and Conservative Jewish movements have warmed to virtual prayer quorums, especially during *Sha'at Dehak* (times of need), Orthodox leaders point to traditional sources and indicate that the ten men needed for certain core prayer need to be in the same physical space. In some communities, the use of technology for social-religious events, such as a kosher cooking class at New York's Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun, took root. This Orthodox community also created programs especially for seniors and singles – including a hosted video conferencing event for singles that included a few uplifting words shared by a rabbi and a mixologist sharing a recipe and technique for a few drinks to enjoy. This event was aimed at giving mostly non-married members of the community in their 20s and 30s space to connect and meet one another; it was meant to mimic programming that would have ordinarily be held at the synagogue itself such as a Friday night cocktails and mingle program followed by a Friday evening prayer service in non-COVID times.

As the realization that the COVID pandemic was going to last months and not days or weeks, organizations across the globe such as Chabad-Lubavitch, the Orthodox Union, the United Synagogue, and the Union of Orthodox Congregations of South Africa turned to technology to connect to congregants during the turbulent period – with the intent to provide means to connect via video and phone services. The United Synagogue, the organization of British Orthodox synagogues reached out to its members and beyond using Zoom, Facebook Live and other technological means and presented lectures and pre-Sabbath services to those in the UK and beyond. While the hosting of online content on the actual Sabbath, from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday, did present issues particularly with the use of technology for streaming prayer services, many synagogues also turned to video conferencing and call-in options for community briefings regarding such issues as COVID-19 in the community, uplifting pre and post-Sabbath services and community conversations on issues of the day and other topics. Within an otherwise close community, often with large families that interact regularly, the desire to connect with one another has expressed itself through the imperfect medium of using technology to share uplifting thoughts and stories via newly created WhatsApp groups that include funny stories, newly composed songs, memes and vlog posts from Orthodox community members and from the COVID-19 recovered patients to provide emotional and spiritual support during such a challenging and trying time.

The COVID-19 period afforded religious leadership the opportunity to confront new issues and concerns. Rabbinic leaders are sought after to deliberate on sensitive questions related to life and death issues on a regular basis, and the intense period of COVID-19 brought new questions to light within the realm of Jewish law. Rabbinic leaders are asked to address such issues, from weighty concerns of, for example, a decision to taking a family member off of life support during COVID-19 treatment, to more everyday issues such as if a wedding should be pushed off to a safer time to

allow extended family to celebrate with the new couple. In light of these issues and others, religious responsa that highlight such questions and answers have been published already in the United States and abroad and cover a wide range of individual and communal concerns, such as Jewish burial rites and safety, temporary burial (due to travel restrictions) and disinterment at a later date and phoning the hospital to advocate for ill family on the holidays and sabbath (due to restrictions that prevent family members on site in hospital settings) and others that continue to arise during this period that is fraught with concern for personal and communal safety and health.

One month after the Purim observance is the holiday of Passover, a holiday that differs greatly from others on the Jewish religious calendar in that it imposes significant dietary restrictions and comes with closely-followed family customs. Food that is kosher (acceptable) for Passover must follow regulations that exceed standard year-round kosher standards and exclude items such as leavened bread. The customary ceremonial family meal, known as a seder, specifically necessitates procurement of special food and utilization of dishware, cookware and utensils that are only for Passover, as well as foodstuffs including Matzah, bitter herbs, Kosher for Passover wine and other holiday needs. Although food is a significant component of the holiday, the observance include a retelling of the story of the exodus from Egypt with a home-based service that often includes many family and friends around the table and is punctuated by a sumptuous meal and symbolic references, readings and song. With questions regarding availability of food, food insecurity, individuals observing the holiday alone for the first time, others that usually visit with multi-generational family structures as well as those that use the time for a holiday away from home and visit a hotel for the duration of the holiday – this year was to be quite different. With the impending Passover holiday, religious leaders geared up for new questions and concerns from congregants, many of whom were preparing for the holiday with the new COVID-19 challenges, by creating primers and guides as well as hosting teleconferences, videoconferences and Q&A sessions in advance to address issues and to ease or allay concerns regarding holiday preparations and observances during this trying period.

Rabbinic leadership also acknowledged another significant component faced by many during this period – isolation. Rabbis and synagogue leadership encouraged checking in on neighbors especially those that might be older, physically limited, or sick to ensure that they had emotional support. For these same people and those that might be afflicted with COVID-19, many communities developed systems to provide food and other necessities for those unable to leave home to visit a grocery store to obtain necessities – becoming true helping hands for many. One such community in Lakewood, NJ was the yeshiva Beth Medrash Gevoha, which created curated boxes filled with Passover necessities for community members that may have never observed the holiday at home, which include new kitchenware and food products and were distributed via contactless pickup to reduce contact between individuals. Some rabbis in the American Orthodox Jewish community notified congregants that they planned to leave their phones on over the Sabbath and holiday period and to call if they are in emotional distress. Realizing that isolation and safety concerns magnify mental health concerns, many acceded to being literal lifelines to those in need by making themselves available 24/7, even on the Sabbath and holidays.

Interestingly, for some the COVID-19 period placed new perspectives on the table related to observance. With communal prayer services extinguished and much later their eventual and slow return, many prayed and observed individually, some for the first time in their lives. This permitted individuals to consider their time, personal connection with the formulaic prayers and the opportunity to be thoughtful about their emphases within their personal observances and religious connections. In an article written in the Five Towns Jewish Times, a local New York Jewish community newspaper on August 6, 2020, Rabbi Dovid M. Cohen notes that in non-COVID times, he would even scramble to find a minyan (a prayer service with the requisite quorum) while on a family vacation, but during COVID-19, he was able to set aside time like never before and concentrate on his morning prayers, devote extra time to the Hebrew words and their meaning, as well as spend more time in contemplation. While prayer services have ranges of times for their performance based on complex mathematical calculations that include sunrise, sunset and geolocation among others, some synagogues suggested that worshippers pray at the same time as one another, even though they were not praying in the same space. Young Israel of North Woodmere and Congregation Ramath Orah, both in New York, suggested to their congregants to continue to pray individually at the stipulated times that the prayer quorum would have met in person in synagogue as a symbol of community unity. Another symbol of unity of the community is the study of a daily folio of Talmud, called Daf Yomi, that allows learners to study to learn the entire Talmud in a span of seven and a half years. The new cycle of Daf Yomi began earlier in January 2020, and the beginning of the second tractate called Shabbat began in early March, just when COVID-19 was bearing down. The recent completion of the tractate after 157 days highlights the dedication to allocate time daily whether through a phone lecture, studying alone or via a pre-recorded video accessed via app.

In such a difficult period, it is beautiful to see the slow and safe return of joyous lifecycle events that even include a summation celebration for the completion of the Sabbath tractate, including one by a groom and another by the father of the bride, in which the family and community took great joy and pleasure of celebrating both and hopefully the beginning to the return to communal observance as in pre-COVID times. As legal restrictions permit, as well as religious organizations and synagogues create spaces that conform in COVID compliance, outdoor weddings and prayer services under open-walled tents will decrease and halls of the synagogues and study halls will once again be filled with voices in prayer and learning as before. The community hopes and awaits the time that communal life can return to the well-accepted norms that they continually long for, while acknowledging new sensibilities and sensitivities.

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Maysa Utairat is currently pursuing a PhD on the adaptation of Buddhist storytelling based on secular Buddhism and the individuality of Thai young performers and audience members. Recently, she had been focusing my practice-based research on creating a theatrical piece that enhances the spirituality of the audience in Buddhist storytelling ritual. She received a Masters of Philosophy in Drama and Theatre Studies from Royal Holloway, University of London in 2019, and a Masters in Advanced Theatre Practice at the Royal Central School of Speech and Dram, University of London, in 2006. She is founder and lecturer of the drama major at the Department of Performing Arts, Mahasarakham University, Thailand. At the moment, she is devising theatre pieces with young performers, audience members and communities in sacred and secular spaces and atmosphere.

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