

TOGETHER

TRUE WAY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH ENGLISH CONGREGATION

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Coming Home by Belinda Tan



More than 70 million passengers pass through Heathrow every year. Some 1,400 flights take off and land every day, one every 45 seconds and nearly half a million per year. As the coronavirus swept across Europe, airlines removed and rerouted flights, and airports fell silent.

In the middle of her second year of PhD studies in the Old Testament, church member Belinda Tan found herself packing her bags to return to Singapore. Her story about how COVID-19 turned life in Cambridge upside down, and how she found her way home is an account of mercy and goodness.

In January, when news first came of a SARS-like virus spreading from China, I assumed it was going to be like weathering SARS all over again.

Back in 2003 when the SARS outbreak hit Singapore, I was

in the first year of my first job. At that time, it was easy to avoid shopping malls since I was so busy at work and never went out much anyway. It was easy to get used to daily temperature checks and the frequent cleaning of surfaces.

Though tragedies in the news reminded us that SARS was dangerous, life didn't change much for me. So, with this new coronavirus, I thought it would simply be a matter of some time and a little inconvenience before things went back to 'normal'.

At the start of February, international air travel wasn't considered extremely risky yet. My mother paid me a visit to celebrate Chinese New Year together. On the day she left the UK, the World Health Organization announced the

official name of the virus: COVID-19. But within ten days, France reported Europe's first COVID-19 death, and the first lockdown was announced in a northern province of Italy. Then, I came across a makeshift memorial to Dr. Li Wenliang along King's Parade, a thoroughfare at Cambridge's

The bubble that was life in Cambridge was beginning to burst.

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city centre. Dr Li was an ophthalmologist in Wuhan who tried to warn his colleagues about a possible coronavirus outbreak. He was penalized for this (but later exonerated), and sadly perished from the illness.

Next, an Oxbridge student conference I was helping to organize was cancelled. The bubble that was life in Cambridge was beginning to burst.

It wasn't only the virus itself that was becoming a serious issue. The fact that the outbreak was first reported in China meant that anyone who looked Chinese faced a certain kind of behaviour. A reluctant handshake. A hasty assurance from the transport worker that I was 'OK' to be his passenger since I didn't look Chinese. A fellow student's experience of a group of young men coughing in her direction while they spat one word: "Coronavirus!"

Then came the news reports of racist attacks in other UK cities like London and Birmingham.

Nevertheless, I wasn't worried for myself. The places I stuck to — the library, the faculty, and my hall of residence — were really only frequented by students, researchers and university staff, and I'd never faced racism in Cambridge itself. I even wondered — if the virus had originated in another country or continent, would I be the one looking at another ethnic group with fear and distrust?

Then another form of discrimination emerged. Let me first give the context for this — in a March 13 interview by the BBC, an expert who gives the UK government advice on the science of its pandemic response spoke on a concept called 'herd immunity'. The idea was to let most of the UK population contract COVID-19, so that the country would become immune to it. But the problem was this: the elderly and others in vulnerable health, who would not be sent away as the population went through infection and recovery, may die from the virus.



Cycling is almost ubiquitous in Cambridge. The city is small and flat, making it perfect for nipping around on a bike. As staff and students started to leave, the lively allegro pulse of university life slowed to a lento pace.

In other words, everyone who wasn't old or frail should assume they would eventually get infected, but they should keep their hands clean and steer clear of gatherings in the meantime.

Hopefully, if social behaviour to prevent the virus from spreading quickly is practised, the strained National Health Service (NHS) would not be overwhelmed.

How do you imagine young students in a university town would react to such a message? My own neighbour was representative of the general response — he shrugged and said he wasn't worried since he would be fine, and even continued to invite people over. He didn't seem to understand that youth was not a vaccine, and he could spread the virus to immunocompromised and elderly friends, teachers and family.

The reaction of the general public was not much better. As panic buying emptied the shelves of toilet rolls, handwash, dried pasta, bread, eggs, and medication, even special shopping hours and delivery services for the physically vulnerable couldn't shorten the agonizingly long queues.

In all this, we can discern



The author at Cambridge's Bridge of Sighs. The bridge was built in 1831 and crosses the River Cam.

the undercurrent of ageism and ableism. Ageism is discrimination against the elderly. Ableism is discrimination against people with disabilities.

While the Old Testament acknowledges that old age is

a time of dependence (Ps 71:9, 18; Ruth 4:15), it also celebrates living to a ripe old age (Prov 16:31; 20:29) and how amazing achievements could still be attained then. For example, Moses was 80 in Exodus 7:7; Caleb was 85 in Joshua 14:6–12.

The elderly are very much part of the story of Jesus too, as we see with Elizabeth and Zechariah in Luke 1, and Simeon and Anna in Luke 2. As for the physically vulnerable, they are often featured across the Old and New Testaments. The blind, lame and leprous are never far from the promises of

Ageism is discrimination against the elderly. Ableism is discrimination against people with disabilities.

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Parker's Piece is a green common in Cambridge famous for football, cricket and picnics. The buses that run around the park are fewer now.

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God (Isa 35:4-6; Luke 7:22).

If care and respect for the weak is no longer an optional work of charity but a core principle of every society, I believe we shall certainly witness the will of God done on earth as it is in heaven.

But back to the March 13 BBC interview — from that day onwards, I began receiving daily advisories from Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) as the coronavirus situation in the UK deteriorated.

Over the weekend, my college asked about my plans — would I be returning home? Since Tyndale House, the biblical studies library where I do most of my work, remained open, I didn't see the need to, especially as the college had promised to take care of international students staying put.

When I shared this decision with my family, they were concerned. They preferred that I came home, though they didn't press me to leave. But the dominoes began to fall.

On Monday, Imperial College London released a model predicting that the NHS would soon be overwhelmed with severe COVID-19 cases and hundreds of thousands would die if the UK government continued with its lack of measures (there were no temperatures checks at airports even when I left). On Tuesday, Tyndale House was closed in a hurry because someone there reported having symptoms.

The same night, MFA basically declared to Singaporeans in the UK: "Come home." And on Wednesday, the university followed the government's decision to close schools for the term, and shut all libraries until further notice. The upcoming Easter term would hence be conducted online.

The university later announced that all 'mass' lectures would be online in the next academic year.

With Tyndale House no longer accessible and even my PhD supervisor strongly recommending that I leave, there was now no reason to stay. The college was starting to worry it may be hard to care for everyone if many people fell ill. What's more, returning would ease my

family's escalating worries. My mother even had trouble sleeping.

Then came the problem of getting a flight home. MFA was quick to work with Singapore Airlines to promise a seat for every Singaporean wishing to return, but in the end it was my family who helped secure my ticket back. No words are enough for how grateful I am for my family — the flight they booked would land mere hours before the time point when all UK arrivals would have to be quarantined in hotel rooms.

I would get to serve my Stay-Home Notice at my brother's unoccupied apartment.

After a frantic weekend of packing up everything in my room, I embarked on a surreal journey home on March 24. The day before, the UK went into lockdown. Thankfully, the taxi company still took bookings to the airport. It was a sombre ride to Heathrow Airport, as I listened to the driver express dismay over the lack of help for him and his elderly parents.

I watched the sun set over England.

When I arrived at around seven, the terminal felt as

Human beings are so interconnected that my welfare is inextricable from yours, and vice versa ... a living illustration of why we are called to be a good neighbour who helps to bring healing, consolation, and transformation to our hurting communities.

though it was midnight — strangely hushed, with more workers than travellers around, and only a convenience store, a pharmacy and a takeaway coffee bar open. Not everyone had a mask on, but unnervingly, there were a few passengers in full personal protective equipment.

The stress of air travel during a pandemic made me keenly aware that no matter how much I have tried to protect myself with masks, antiseptic wipes and physical distancing, there was no way to avoid close contact, whether it was with the taxi driver, the check-in and boarding staff, or the inflight crew, who were the only ones to all wear masks and gloves. And while the flight wasn't anywhere close to full — there were no late arrivals at the boarding gate when the last call came — I couldn't avoid using the washroom or removing my mask to eat or drink on the 14-hour flight.

So much depended on the wisdom and kindness of those around me, and ultimately, the mercy of God. It was a living illustration of why we are called to be good neighbours to one another — human beings are so interconnected that my welfare is inextricable from yours, and vice versa. I pray that in the days to come, each of us will be a good neighbour who helps to bring healing, consolation, and transformation to our hurting communities. ■

Voices from the Pandemic, Part 1

by Lee Chung Horn, Soh Lay Bin, Joyce Peh and Kevin Chua



In the pandemic, masks divided people. Do you wear one if you are well? And what type of mask? Why exempt joggers? Reuse, or sew your own? Photo by Ronnie Koh.

Stories are important; but in the present time of coronavirus, they become even more important. The stories may be simple statements. Or eyewitness accounts. What holds them together is they help us to understand what's happening to our world, and to us. Urgent and heartfelt, these oral histories are a record of this crisis, telling us with lean honesty: this is what is happening; this is what I saw, how I feel. Some of these stories have no tidy end. This is because the person does not know the end. But the first step toward making sense of them is this: somebody tells his or her story.

We spoke to many people in our church family. Many people were eager to tell us their joys and struggles, successes and failures. Some folks told us other people's stories. Some were shy and asked that we do not publish their names. We have abided by their requests.

We told them there were no right stories or wrong stories. At the end of our project, we learned ourselves that there

were no better answers and, certainly, no smarter ones.

We found that refusing to accept the truth about what was happening stopped us from accepting the fullness of Christ's life in us. And that what possessed the greatest value was truth, no more, and certainly no less.

The truth that is contained inside the thousands of thoughts and moments that

filled our days in the time of the coronavirus.

May you find yourself in each of these voices, and find the best parts that lift you up, and also, because time makes us stronger, the hard parts that make us look forward with sad but hard-won wisdom.



I recall the Prime Minister's third broadcast. He spoke at around 4pm, Friday afternoon. By that time, we'd already received a warning that schools were going to close. Things were taking a turn for the worse. The government wanted to impose a circuit-breaker. We only had four days to transform our lectures and tutorials into

What possessed the greatest value was truth, no more, and certainly no less.

online lessons. All universities and schools will then shut their doors to their students. After the broadcast, our students spoke with us. Many of our kids were distraught. They wouldn't have time to work on their projects because the CB cuts their time-line. They were scared they would get poor grades. But caught between consoling our students, and putting our teaching curricula online, our teachers got the work done before we locked our gates.

An NTU lecturer, as related to a church congregant

One sad thing that happened as a result of the circuit breaker is our DG could not have meals together.

Linda Keh, church congregant

On some Sundays, I 'went' to another church. I watched their online service. It was refreshing. Now, we have

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choices every Sunday.

Young adult, after we closed Sunday worship on 22 March

I still go to the office every day. We prepare credit card machines, the seven of us. But work has dried up. This time of the year, we'd be gearing up for the Great Singapore Sale, road shows and expo's. But there's nothing.

Mayden Asibor, church congregant

I work with two young trainees at work. They will graduate from our bank program this August. But given the headcount freeze everywhere, they may not find jobs.

Cheryl Teo, bank officer

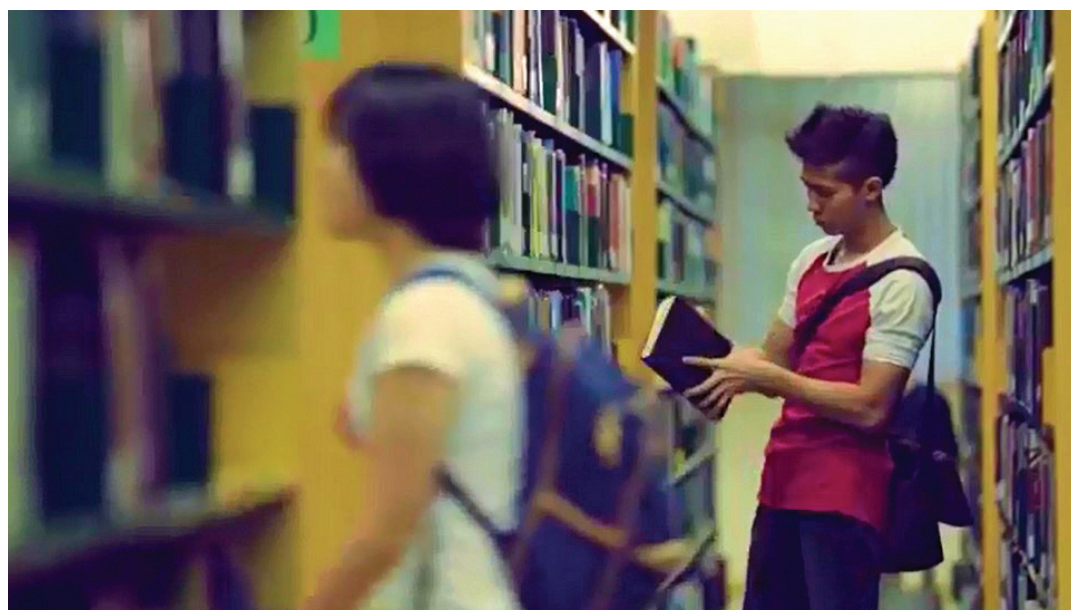
My wife and I are old. I'm 76. She's 74. We live on our own. We're following instructions, we don't go out anymore because we don't want to cause trouble to our children, who have their own worries. Covid 19 kills old people.

Church congregant, after hearing the PM's announcement of the extension of CB on 21 April 2020

I wish Christian leaders would stop saying that the coronavirus gives us an opportunity to get serious about Lent, that we can now spend the extra free time reflecting on God and ourselves. I'd been observing Lent every year. What the coronavirus has done is take Lent from me. Instead of praying and fasting and reading my Bible, my attention has been pulled away by the daily headlines, the non-stop news and government instructions. I don't have more time for Lent. I feel robbed of Lent.

Man, church congregant, late 50s. The country declared a state of DORSCON Orange midway through Lent

My university friends are all feeling down. We feel worried and uncertain. Some of my classmates are internationals. They left their home country to come study in Singapore. They worry about their families. Very few



Universities closed their doors, striking down lectures and classrooms, snuffing out team spirit, discovery and aspirations.



In the lockdown, hawker centres are strapped with tape and plastic. Overnight, their look becomes a taut "You are not welcome any more." Photo by Jonathan Tham.

countries are like Singapore. They say they feel safe in Singapore.

Emma Lee, university student, before the announcement of the circuit breaker

Lent? What's that? *Young adult*

The internet has become critically important during the lockdown. Businesses need to be online to survive. Churches now run worship services online. We all need the internet to stay connected. But there are unknown vulnerabilities in our less-than-perfect systems. Outages have happened. And imagine what would happen if rogue groups exploit and disrupt our telcos? We will be in trouble.

Effendy Chearles, telco industry

I felt many emotions. There was sadness. Also,

calmness and hope. And irritation at people who were cavalier about being socially responsible.

Audrey Lee, church congregant

Easter this year felt weird. It felt strange to be at home, watching the TV. Of all the Sundays, Easter Sunday was the most painful Sunday for me.

Man, church congregant, married, 50s.

I don't think any of us anticipated what Covid-19 would bring upon the church.

Lee Kien Seng, senior pastor

Nothing can affect Easter. Covid or not, to me, the crux of Easter – what Christ did on the cross and His resurrection – remains the same.

Audrey Lee, church congregant

I signed up as a volunteer to work in the migrant worker dorms, but they haven't contacted me yet.

Hannah Mok, church congregant

Yesterday, sitting in our consultation room, a patient who'd been coming to me regularly for treatment for many years asked: "Dr Lee, what religion are you?"

Like many people, he wore a mask. His tone was conspiratorial. He stopped, adjusted himself in his seat, and continued. "You know, our problem is religious people. They're why we are in this trouble. Church people and church clusters."

He paused to see if I understood. I was taken aback. A blinding light came through the window, making it hard for me to see his masked face. In that moment, I understood something that I had sensed for weeks. Our masks have come between us. I couldn't see what he was feeling and expressing.

He went on, about the chaos from the White House and Europe's unpreparedness, about China's offer of aid to Italy.

This patient is a friend because, well, with time, many patients become more than patients. Our relationships deepen. I often

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become confidante, confessor, brother, uncle, a shoulder.

Despite the mask, I knew he spoke deeply, from his heart. The virus has touched him like it has all of us, in all kinds of ways.

Lee Chung Horn, medical doctor

COVID-19 took away some of my freedoms. But working from home has given me more time with my wife Pei Xin. We are expecting our first child later this year. I guess this means life will change again in a few months.

Michael Khoo, church deacon

Thanks to the internet, information gets to people at great speeds. But then, so does misinformation. Somebody said information is often kept behind pay walls, but misinformation is free.

BBC World Service snippet, as related by a church member.

Some church people share false messages. They are not so smart. They just don't know how to distinguish falsehood from truth.

Church congregant, 50s

Instead of the non-stop scary messages we have been receiving and sending, why don't we send something good into the world?

Woman, 30s

Teaching my students from home wasn't too bad. We use a mix of 'live' lessons on Google Meet, and homework assignments hosted on Google Drive and SLS.

Samuel Liu, church congregant

I have two tenants living with me. They are two Malaysian Indian women who work with CISCO CERTIS. After Malaysia imposed the MCO on 1 April, they were stranded and could not travel home anymore. We get along very well. As you know, I love to cook. Now I don't have to eat by myself anymore. I'm very thankful that I can extend Christian hospitality during this crisis.

Linda Keh, church congregant



Life changed in unimaginable ways. COVID-19 stripped Easter, Vesak Day and Hari Raya of their social dimensions. What's next? How will we celebrate National Day? Photo by Ronnie Koh.



At the beginning, some taxi-drivers were afraid to take passengers who may have infections. Later, work-from-home orders kept people off the streets. Taxi drivers saw their earnings dwindle. Many struggle to make ends meet. Photo by Ronnie Koh.

I wonder whether people will get lazy. If you can get live-streaming and online services in the comfort of your homes, will you find it hard to come back on Sunday?

Church congregant, married, 50s.

My life hasn't become harder, except for the inconvenience of having to wear a mask when I go out. However, when I think of the frontline workers having to don a mask or protective gear all day long, I see mask-wearing as my duty.

Soh Lay Bin, church deacon

Business is down. All our music classes stopped. Tim is having a holiday. I go to the office only to collect bills. Well, I have time to clear unwanted stuff from my storeroom. You know, I'm a hoarder.

Raymond Tan, church congregant

Will COVID-19 make mankind realise that life

is more than accumulating material things? I'm not really optimistic about this. There was a report in the local press about a group of younger people – not Singaporeans – who gave up their materialistic lifestyle because the coronavirus badly affected their incomes. I wonder how long this lifestyle change will last?

Lek Siang Hwa, church elder

A friend of mine had to postpone his May wedding. A cousin is not sure if he should shift his plans to get married in August.

Cheryl Teo, bank officer

After the schools closed, I worked from home. What's that? Well, I stay in contact with the parents of my special needs school kids. I spend at least 30 minutes a week with them, helping them work on their goals. But it's a struggle. Especially for working parents who have to work from home. They now have to supervise

their children's lessons, too. If you have several children, the stress gets worse.

Chan Li Yan, special education teacher

One good thing is some of us are listening to more than one sermon a week. Besides our weekly sermon, I've been tuning in to ARPC, predominantly. And Park Street Church in Boston, but Gordon Hugenberger only.

Audrey Lee, church congregant

I buy the cheapest petrol. Man, 40s.

There are stresses at work, and video conferencing doesn't make things easy. The lockdown is going to kill a lot of businesses, and not just small ones. Even Virgin Air is in trouble.

Ng Tah Wee, church elder

I used to wake up at 6.30 am to catch the train to work. After the circuit breaker was imposed, I worked from home. So I wake up at 8.30 am. One day I got up at 9.50am. I felt terrible.

Man, single, 28.

History has shown us how human families can be split apart. Sometimes this happens because of political and national ideologies. Think of Pakistan separating from Bangladesh, or the two Koreas. People say, "This will not happen in Singapore." But it has. When everyone has to stay home and not visit loved ones, when hugging and kissing our family members is now impossible, our families have become divided.

We know that in some parts of the world, Christians cannot gather in churches. This won't happen, not in Singapore. Yet, when religious groups in Singapore were told to suspend their gatherings so as to cut down community spread, it feels like we have been thrust into a socialist state.

In some countries, you cannot go into the streets to share the gospel. This will not happen in Singapore, we say. But when we were warned that the coronavirus is passed from person to person and that we need to practise social distancing, street evangelism is

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no longer an option.

We sometimes joke that we won't die without bubble-tea. Death from a lack of bubble tea will never happen in Singapore. But when non-essential businesses were told to shut down, fights broke out.

Joyce Peh, Singapore Youth For Christ staff worker

No Chinese tuition. The tuition teacher is not allowed to come. Hooray! Boy, 9.

I miss the annual Easter convention meetings. My wife and I attend every year. There was a big hole this year.

Man, late 50s.

I hear all the big players in food catering are being roped in to provide meals for foreign workers. They're really cooking up a storm. Our government is doing a tremendous job caring for our foreign workers.

Ng Tah Wee, church elder

Here's what I think. I think students cannot be expected to attend five or six Zoom classes, or watch online lectures for hours. I think some families probably have more students than internet devices or computers in their homes. I know schools have provided materials. But deadlines must be few and lenient. I'm glad teachers have not been naggy. You need to trust parents to make decisions about what their children most need.

Ex-educator, 60s.

Remember to give our elderly loved ones a call.

Betty Chen, church congregant

But I miss teaching classes. The online lessons I teach don't have the frisson that a physical lesson has. And I know the kids want to be in school again, with their friends.

Samuel Liu, church congregant

Since my work has gone down about 70%, I now divide my time between helping my daughter deliver stuff to our ministry children, reading



We are thankful for the Zoom meetings that allowed us to meet for bible study, worship and business. But what part of Zoom is novelty? Will our feelings sour in the future, if we're told life will not return to normal? Photo by Jediah Lim.



Work-in-progress. Jimmy Ang and his Tuscany oil-painting. Self-portrait.

National Library books on painting, and getting on with painting. I'm halfway through a 1.7mX 1.4m oil painting of a Tuscany morning scene.

Jimmy Ang, church congregant

My mom and dad don't always get along well. If we don't turn up periodically to ease tension, I think they will go crazy.

Kuah En Shyang, church congregant

I'm grateful to have an online service to join. But it's different, it can't be compared to a real worship service. I miss many things – the entry of the Word, holy communion, meeting fellow believers face-to-face.

Ong Poh Kwan, church congregant

How is the church faring? I'm trusting God to hold His church fast.

Lee Kien Seng, senior pastor

We are seeing a smaller number of clients. But this not because of a fall in demand. People are anxious. They are grateful to talk to someone during this difficult period. But some of our



Christians see themselves as a body of disciples, not lone travellers. Hence the call to not gather was a hard, ironic counter-punch. On the personal level, it created anxiety and pain, and, truthfully, its fallout on ecclesiology will be unclear for some time. Photo by Jonathan Tham.

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Voices from the Pandemic, Part 2

by Lee Chung Horn, Soh Lay Bin, Joyce Peh and Kevin Chua

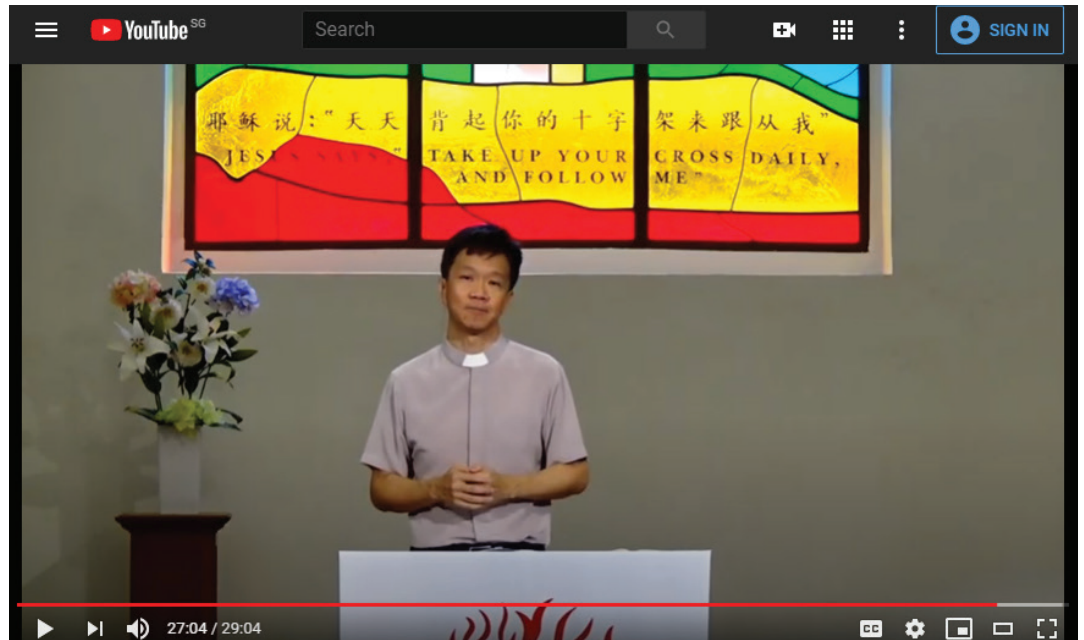
A commentator wrote about the coronavirus pandemic: "If we're just looking to stop the spread of the virus, we will eventually do that with science. Yet it seems we are looking for something deeper. If we merely seek to return to the world we knew before the virus, we will have missed a generational moment."

What is the deeper thing we're most longing for? The likely truth for many of us is we just want to go back to our world, our lives, our church. It stops there. If we're honest with ourselves. We aren't aware of, or terribly interested in, the idea of learning lessons, or in the belief that we can stretch and grow.

Life in Singapore the last three months has been confusing and difficult. Many reports and instructions from the government, many messages from leaders. But as Singapore now enters Phase 1, none of us would have failed to hear the insistent message from government leaders, loud and clear: don't expect things to return to normal, because they won't.

In our second part of Voices from the Pandemic, our moment in time has moved on. The CB is behind us. We're told to step forward. Phase 1.

Nothing is neat, of course. Phase 1 is still laden with uncertainty. For example, the grim contagion inside our country's migrant worker dormitories that blew up



There are reports that online church 'attendances' during the pandemic may have gone up in some countries. But watching online is much less of a commitment than attending in person. Photo by Erick Kencana.

our early success isn't half over. Yes, imported cases were already few and local transmissions calm.

But not the fear that has torched the community of 323,000 foreign workers who live among us in our society, whom we see, but sometimes don't really see. Some of our stories in this second part tell about the sojourner in our land.

Those of us who had the privilege to help our migrant workers inside their dorms or community facilities saw a world filled with equal parts of anxiety, and hope. Some of the anxiety the foreign men felt came from disadvantage.

But hope is also felt in many ways, especially the look on their faces that simply said: "Sir, I know you can save us, and will."

Don't expect things to return to normal, because they won't.



Do we long for anything deeper than returning to our lives, our world, our church? Photo by Erick Kencana.

Part 2 of "Voices from the Pandemic" also includes stories about easing the lockdown, opening up the doors we had to shut, and returning from our exile.

Can we go back to school. Can we take the MRT and bus without flinching. Can we return to God's sanctuaries on Sunday again, to meet Him?

Will our simple dreams of

return, our assumptions of restoration come to pass? Or will they require some conversion?



To be honest, I think we heard more sermons during the lockdown than the whole of last year. Online church has been good for us. Because we

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have young kids, we don't make it to church very much. When the pandemic ends, if online services end, we might not make it to church again.

Young couple, early 30s, married with children.

I was retrenched in 2018. I still have no job. Employers don't want people in their 50s, even if they're willing to lower their pay expectations. Despite government grants, many PMETs in Singapore are jobless. Just recently, I got rejected again. The man asked me how old I was.

Ong Poh Kwan, church congregant

Cheryl and I were planning to holiday in Japan during the May 1 long weekend. Look how that turned out.

Shaun Tan, church congregant

It was so painful not being able to visit my mother's grave. Because of the lockdown, the NEA said no to cemetery visitors. I could not place fresh flowers at my mom's tombstone. At the cemetery entrance, I was stopped by the police: "No, you can't enter." As the taxi turned around, I felt a terrible pain. This was the anniversary of mom's death and I'd failed to go to her. There will never be another 13 April 2020. I should have come earlier. As the taxi drove away, I felt like a mother who had left her toddler alone at home. When she got into her apartment, she remembered the window she had left open. Her child, mine, has fallen out.

Liancy Tan, church congregant

I'm spending more time on the internet. Sometimes, I read world news. Sometimes, recipes.

Linda Keh, church congregant

Our son Yong En is a special needs child. He also has a heart condition. Though he has grown up, we never stop thinking about him. I grew increasingly worried for him as the cases in Singapore went up day by day. Yong En was still working, selling books with his mom. I wanted to keep him at home. But that would mean

getting his boss's permission. Also, I would have to ask my own boss for permission to stay home to look after him. God helped us by providing the CB. When PM made the announcement at 4pm, I saw in that an answered prayer. We are all at home now.

Wong Kin Leong, church congregant, when the CB was imposed

Elder! Elder! Elder! I want to ask you when the circuit breaker over thank God can can all the children go back to visit the family? Is like that? Because I don't understand. And can my mother visit my sister to see my sister's children that will be my nephew and niece to take care of them? Or can how about the other way? My sister send them over every day can? Stay till night time can?

Amos Tan, 31, church congregant

Our family has been cooking and baking. And playing table tennis.

Low Tock Heng, church congregant

We have 323,000 migrant workers in Singapore. One in ten are infected, maybe more. How did that happen?

Woman, 40s

Some of us dislike foreigners because they compete for jobs. The reality is very few migrant people are managers and executives competing with us. They do the jobs that we will not do. In truth, they keep Singapore going.

Man, late 50s, church congregant

I work on projects in the factory automation industry. The uncertainties about the future of construction work sites is wearing me down. I can't plan anymore. Want to hear more? First, many Malaysian workers scrambled to get into Singapore before the border closed on March 18. That was the first MCO or Movement Control Order. We were so glad they made it. We thought these Malaysian workers would keep our projects going. Then our own CB came on 7 April. This stopped nearly every one of our workers from continuing to work. So, by 15 April, many workers decided to go back to



As the number of COVID-19 infections rose day by day inside foreign worker dorms, eventually accounting for 90 per cent of all cases, public debate began. Have Singapore's employment laws protected foreigners fairly? Should we cut our reliance on low-wage foreign workers? But business groups and trade associations soon came out against these calls, saying these steps could backfire on Singaporeans. Photo by Lee Chung Horn.



The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever. Photo by Pexels.

their Johore homes to wait out the CB. The next thing was the Singapore CB got extended. Then the MCO got extended three more times by the Malaysian government. Now, we have received news that we can apply to MTI for project resumption, starting 2 June. But even if we get approval, our foreign workers may not still be allowed to leave the dorms to travel to the worksites!

Desmond Tan, church congregant

I'm a runner. With the CB, more people are running. They need to get out of the house. Today, I ran past some migrant workers, but they were wearing masks.

Wong Kin Leong, before migrant worker dorms were closed down

I'm petrified. I haven't left my home at all for eight weeks. The virus is out there. Besides, I'm an Indian national. Imagine if I broke a rule and my photo appeared on the front page of the Straits Times!

Indian man, bank manager,

50s, as related to a church congregant

After Mom passed away six months ago, my dad lives alone. We've told him to wear a mask when he goes out to buy food. He is lonely. I'm worried and paralysed, not knowing when the pandemic will end, and not being able to visit.

Ong Poh Kwan, church congregant

I stay home, I don't go out unless it is necessary. I practise good hygiene. This pandemic will be over eventually.

Joe Tan, 78, church congregant

As Christians, we must intercede for people who are truly suffering beyond merely the inconvenience of a shutdown.

Pearl Tan, church congregant

Many churches have been forced to put their services online. They're persuading their people to

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Voices from the Pandemic, Part 2

worship together in spirit on Sunday. But this is an irregular arrangement. If church gatherings are still not allowed after the lockdown ends, we may ask congregants to meet in very small groups with appropriate social distancing measures.

Png Eng Keat, probationary preacher

After they allowed haircuts, I went and had mine. I know. My hair is now very, very short. I don't care, I'm thinking it has to last six months. Who knows if there would be another lockdown?

Woman, late 50s

In church, I volunteer with Prison Fellowship of Singapore. Over the last two years, I'd been teaching math to a Sec 1 boy. The circuit breaker stopped that. I haven't seen him for nine weeks.

Lim Kian Hwee, 25, church congregant

Some of my colleagues have volunteered to run the PCR tests for coronavirus. We're all lab people. Some friends have volunteered at dorms managed by Singhealth. Lab researchers have been asked to stop their research unless they're doing COVID-19 projects. This happened to me. So I'm not sure if our institute will still be able to meet this year's KPIs, or whether the KPIs still apply.

Wu Meihui, church congregant

I have a blocked nose and my throat feels uncomfortable. But I don't want to keep seeing the doctor. He might give me 5 days MC and SHN. Then I will be stuck at home. The CB is bad enough already.

Geraldine Mok, church congregant

We're not very social or extroverted people. We like being at home. But not like this.

Kevin Chua, church congregant

The end will come when a vaccine is available.

Lek Siang Hwa, church elder



Most of our foreign workers live inside dormitories. Their lodgings are paid for by their employers, or taken out of their salaries. Human rights groups quickly said that the dorms were filthy and germ-infested. The government said the majority of workers were pleased with their work and living conditions in Singapore. Photo by Lee Chung Horn.



There are now many tests for the coronavirus. But the most widely used, and relied-upon, one is a nasopharyngeal swab test.

I feel construction in Singapore has to change. Especially the migrant worker dorms. Three years ago, I gave some of my own plans to the government but I got no interest. We need a new generation of creative, young engineers for the country. But young people seem to want well-paying jobs in banking.

Expatriate construction engineer, as related to a church congregant

Migrant workers work very hard to support their families back at home. Right now, I have four cleaners who work with us. Thankfully all have tested negative. These men are gentle and friendly, and they are tough and resilient. They remind me of the several migrant men who came to our 4pm service in the 90s. Long time ago. They joined a bible study with Pastor Eddy Wee.

Alex Chan, church elder

I was put in a team of 14 volunteers. We're at Tuas

South to work with the foreign workers. My job was very simple. I just had to do the swab registration.

Hannah Mok, church congregant

I think it's right for Christian groups and churches to render assistance to migrant workers. Not out of guilt, but because it expresses the love of God. There are many needs in society, and different churches have different priorities. Foreign workers are in the limelight right now. Whether the work among foreign workers will continue in the future will depend on the type of relationships that churches build with them.

Alex Chan, church elder

I haven't learned to say "Amra apnake haashpalate niye jabo" yet. That's Bengali for "We will take you to hospital." Why are so many people suddenly so interested in volunteering at the migrant worker dorms?

Singaporean healthcare worker, as related to a church congregant

One consequence of COVID-19 is commercial real estate will contract. The world of the future will not be built on physical spaces, offices and businesses.

An IT expert's view, as told to a church congregant

"All the emotional connections that create trust and love, the notion of teamwork that makes for strong organisations – what'll happen to all that?"

Any vaccine that becomes available will need infrastructure for equitable, global distribution. We couldn't agree more with Bill Gates, who wrote, "During a pandemic, vaccines and antivirals can't simply be sold to the highest bidder. They should be available and affordable to people at the heart of the outbreak and in greatest need." But who? Frontline health workers, or ordinary people? Higher-income countries that can pay, or poor countries that can't buy?

Rebecca Weintraub, Prashant Yadav and Seth Berkley, report in Harvard Business Review, April 2020

If the world moves away from having physical offices in future, and people are limited to working from home, company culture will die. You know, the ties that bind? The pantry encounters? All the emotional connections that create trust and love, the notion of teamwork that makes for strong organisations – what will happen to all that?

Woman, logistics manager, as told to a church congregant

Locking down the world has reduced emissions and pollution. I see that nature is reclaiming some of the damage done by man. COVID-19 has given me time, to reflect on the frenetic pace of my life, and remember what's important, and counts for eternity.

Audrey Lee, church congregant

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Voices from the Pandemic, Part 2

March 10 was the last time I flew a plane. I flew to Bangkok.

Low Tock Heng, church congregant

It can be overwhelming when the news is about COVID-19 all day long. So I turn on my audio bible instead. Having a spirit of thanksgiving helps make each day special even when one isn't able to go out very much. I give thanks for that home-cooked meal that turned out better than I expected, for phone chats with family and friends, for the webinar sessions that went well, for the refreshing walk in the park, for DG meetings on Zoom, for the resilience of my students, and for being able to teach and set online exams. We'll be a lot happier if we count our blessings.

Pearl Tan, church congregant

We will see 45,600 retrenchments this year. DBS economist, in a *Straits Times* report

Because people now work from home, there's a big fall in the taxi business. My husband drives a Grab taxi, but he doesn't get to drive much now. Will we survive this?

Woman, 50s, church congregant

I found myself thinking, "Have we done our duty to the poor and vulnerable in our society? Have we been keeping our family relationships in good stead? Will our relationships survive now that we have to see each other at home 24-7?"

Soh Lay Bin, church deacon

The plan was for me to train to fly the A350. But because of cost-cutting, that training didn't begin. Air travel has collapsed around the world. Singapore Airlines, as you know, had a cash bailout by Temasek Foundation. Because 40% of my pay structure comes from flying, my income has gone down. But I have sufficient savings. After twenty years of flying, it's kind of nice to be in one time zone. God has been good. But my colleagues

and I are waiting to work again. *Low Tock Heng, church congregant*

We know retail shopping will never be the same again. We know restaurants that closed may never re-open. Classrooms of the future will be different. Why should we even believe we can come back to church again?

Church congregant, late 50s.

I have had to work overseas very often during the last eight years. This sometimes led to my missing Sunday services for months. To be honest, not receiving holy communion because of the circuit breaker is not a big concern for me.

Desmond Tan, church congregant

If we are honest, doing DG meetings on Zoom is hard. It's just not the same thing. It's not personal. There's little worship time. Sometimes there's an annoying, high-pitched screech when too many mobile phones are connected. I find that distracting.

Ong Poh Kwan, church congregant

This is a time in which daily life is totally disrupted. A dangerous disease is going around. People's financial futures are precarious. This is a bad time to lose friends. But when you find yourself disagreeing with your friends over social distancing or staying home, and feel that they're immature or irresponsible, you will be angry. You may say you don't want to continue the relationship when the pandemic ends. Best friends still? No way.

Church congregant, 40s, recounts a magazine article he read.

COVID-19 has taught me not to be too presumptuous that "this will not happen in Singapore." I've realized that we can still live well when we're stripped of our "necessity" to travel, to feast, and to shop. But social distancing has been hard because God has created us to be relational beings.

Joyce Peh, SFYC staff worker

I still have a job that pays me a salary. But for some friends who work in businesses that have been stopped by



Moving out of the partial lockdown in stages, the people of Singapore are required to wear masks, shields and keep a safe distance from each other. How well will we do this in offices, schools and riding the MRT?

COVID-19, there's real, horrific pain.

Man, late 30s

Please forgive me when sometimes I don't really want to join a Zoom meeting. Zoom and livestreams make me feel many emotions, but always my separation from you, and how profound our loss is.

Lee Chung Horn, church elder

We're learning to give thanks in the midst of many disruptions. Our daughters are starting to feel the cabin fever. Sophia misses going to her dance class and seeing her friends. She's prancing around at home by herself, but it's not the same.

Edwin Wong, associate minister

Last December, we took up ballroom dancing. Well, COVID-19 has put an end to dance lessons with the tutor now. Between the two of us, my husband has a longer background in ballroom dancing. He's quite intense, so we're still practising our routine. After a day's work, I just want to lie on the couch. He wants to dance.

Woman, about 39, as related to a church congregant

Some businesses require people to fly for work. I'm one of the flyers. I think flying will have to pick up in three months, maybe August.

Shaun Tan, church congregant

My wife and domestic helper are in charge of cooking. I just do the dishes.

Edwin Wong, associate minister

Today the Singapore government said for the first time since the crisis began that we will see a recession. Ordinary people don't really understand GDP. Most of this stuff goes over our heads. But today, in front page news, we're told to expect salary cuts and job losses. This is not coffeeshop talk. It's the MAS.

*Married couple, 40s, after reading *Straits Times* on 29 April 20.*

Working from home has blurred the line between work and home. My typical work day is fast-paced, filled with deadlines. With WFH, I find it hard to get off work. Even on weekends, my 'office' is right there in front of me, a click away. Do I logon?

Cheryl Teo, church congregant

Our son Yong En enjoys trips out to buy food. We have told him not to go out so often. He misses his uncle friends and aunty friends at the food stalls.

Wong Kin Leong, church congregant

Today I read about "behavioural fatigue" in the press. Fatigue means weariness, disbelief, or an unwillingness to carry on. In the charity world, there's "donor fatigue". In NGOs and churches, there's "volunteer fatigue". The British government had wanted to chart a less strenuous course than the rest of the world, doing fewer tests and imposing fewer restrictions because it was worried about "behavioural fatigue". They soon changed strategy. Would we Singaporeans be overcome by "behavioural fatigue" before the battle's done? Will our

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Voices from the Pandemic, Part 2

church last the race?

Lee Chung Horn, church elder

Phase 1 is coming. We've been busy discussing plans to re-open classes for our ITE students. To reduce student numbers, I think we may split a class of 40 students into two classes of 20 students each. Students will be seated further apart. Lecturers will do twice the amount of lesson time. When we teach, we need to wear face shields.

Jonathan Tham, church congregant

I left my job as the coronavirus crisis was beginning. I signed up with a recruitment agency, and worked a few part-time jobs: warehouse assistant for online goods, temperature screener, and operation packer. The agencies prefer people who can commit to longer stints, and even part-timers are getting retrenched.

Melva Lee, 26, church congregant

Church is our village, and we are incomplete without it.

We found ourselves praying for the Covid-19 pandemic during our devotion time. Bringing the whole situation to God reminds us how finite we are as humans.

Cheryl Teo and Shaun Tan, newly marrieds

I will be thrilled when church reopens. It's not that our faith is running aground. We're keeping up, more or less. What we miss are the people. There is an optimism to our church community that keeps life moving forward. Church is our village, and we're incomplete without it.

Discipleship group leader, 50s

My ITE colleagues and I have felt overwhelmed by the emotional and mental strain of conducting HBL. I worry about the new lecturers who joined the school in April and May. These rookie lecturers from industry didn't get any buddy



With air travel grinding to a worldwide halt, Changi International Airport is barely recognisable.



Why not dance?

mentoring because it's now all WFH. But what's worried us most is the inability of our students to focus. All of our kids are from non-express streams in secondary school. Some of them come from families that are too poor to afford laptops. The pandemic has been very tough for everyone, but I never forget I was a retrenched guy myself who lost his job twenty years ago during the dotcom period. If I'd lost my job now, I don't think I would find a job for a very long time. I'm thankful to God.

Jonathan Tham, church congregant

I saw something that touched me. I was out to buy groceries when I saw this lady offering her mask to a stranger.

Woman, 40s, church congregant

We were looking forward to getting the keys of our new flat in May, but that's not possible now. Well, the CB has given us an opportunity to save more money. Also, it gives Shaun an opportunity to get to know my family better because that's where we're staying now. Before the CB, I lived with his family.

Cheryl Teo and Shaun Tan, newly marrieds

It can't be that my children are safe only if they are with me, in Singapore. My children are safe wherever they are, or may be, in the world. As a mom, I need so desperately to get to this place.

Woman whose two children studying in overseas universities chose not to return to Singapore despite the spread of coronavirus in those countries, as related to a church congregant

Being human, Christians are relational beings. We need fellowship, we want to share with one another, to hold each other accountable in our Christian living. We want to hear words encouraging us to persevere. It's hard to imagine us worshipping in the same sanctuary, but each acting and operating in a solo manner.

Lek Siang Hwa, church elder

I'm thankful to live in Singapore where we have help and enablers to deal with the crisis.

Audrey Lee, church congregant

When we finally open church again, I know I'll feel afraid. To return. To a strange place. A place I may not recognize. We will see crosses taped on our pews. We'll not speak too much. We will move quickly to our safe spaces. We will not see smiles because we will wear masks. So I will gaze into your eyes, the eyes of the people I love so much. Maybe I will see tears. You will see tears in my eyes.

Man, late 50s, church congregant

After several months of keeping churches shuttered, church leaders will have a hard time when the government gives them the green light to re-open their sanctuaries. In a media-saturated world filled with a confusing cacophony of opinions, how will we rebuild again the confidence of our people? The post-Covid church at True Way may never look like this again. Photo by Erick Kencana.

Reopening our churches

(and what ours may look like) by Lee Chung Horn

As the world starts to come out of lockdown, many nations are looking around, not just inside their borders, but at what other governments are doing. The big question for Christians is: in the time of the coronavirus, what will the church of the coming future look like?

On April 16, 2020, the U.S. White House released *Opening Up America Again*.*

This was a three-phase guideline that outlined a path to re-opening the U.S. economy while mitigating the risk of resurgence in COVID-19 infections and protecting vulnerable populations.

The three-phase approach was to be implemented on a state-wide basis, or community-by-community at the discretion of state governors. The Trump administration explicitly left the timetable for opening up states to the governors.

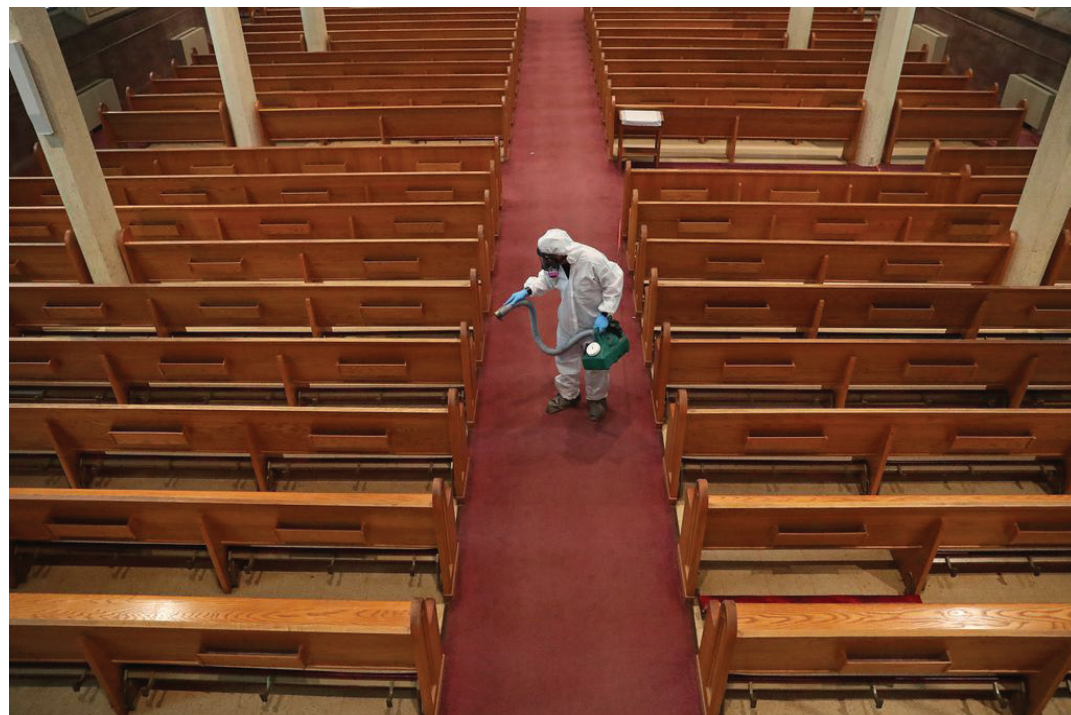
Singapore's strategy for emerging from the circuit breaker also has three phases. This cautious, step-by-step approach is seen around the world, where many nations are now looking around, not just inside their borders, but at what other governments are doing.

But in Singapore, the timeline for transitioning between the three phases is determined by the government.

In the time of the coronavirus, what will church look like?

As a writer, I share a common impulse with other writers. What is ahead?

Many of us who write are practising Christians. The big question for us is this one: in



Infected premises, like this church in Dorchester, Massachusetts, have had to be shuttered and disinfected.

the time of the coronavirus, what will the church of the coming future look like?

We want to tackle this question because it's a fascinating one, and our faith communities want to know.

The big magazines – *Christianity Today*, *The Gospel Coalition*, *ERLC*, *Commonweal*, *America* and more – have published an avalanche of news stories, thought pieces, and op-eds about the coronavirus. There's also an emerging body of content about what church, when it re-opens, will look like.

I want to know what True Way will look like.

Get real, this will be the new normal.

To be sure, a lot of the already-published content is broad commentary, not descriptions or prescriptions. For example, we are told: don't expect to go back to the normal. Or, get real, this will be

the new normal.

Although there are several fairly in-depth descriptions, there's not really a lot that sounds substantive.

Clearly, Christian leaders, and this includes local church leaders too, are waiting for things to solidify, and for other bolder souls to speak forth, and speak first.

What's happening in the U.S.?

Most of us are aware that American society in recent time has become frighteningly mired in division and partisanship. Although Singapore is very different from the U.S., there are lessons we can draw from studying what's happening in America.

After President Donald J Trump unveiled his plan for reopening America, a more exhaustive 'roadmap' quietly appeared on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's website on May 20.

This 60-page document gave detailed recommendations for reopening restaurants, mass transit, schools and child care programs across the United States. It's the official word from the CDC, sanctioned by the White House, and it devolves responsibility to the 50 states, insisting that local groups and communities should decide for themselves, not federal government leaders.

There was anger at this approach, of course. Many Americans felt this was a sorry abdication of leadership. But what's particularly interesting to me is the White House's decision to totally remove the section on houses of worship from the CDC document.

The reason for Trump's decision to cut down an important block of recommendations pertaining to religious communities is easy to understand. In an election year, in the furnace of a rapidly

* <http://www.whitehouse.gov/openingamerica>

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Reopening our churches

fraying society, maintaining political support from his religious base is important. White evangelicals should not feel that the President was making it hard for them to have Sunday in-person gatherings again.

How Singapore is different

Unlike America, where the touchstones of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness enshrined in the Declaration of Independence are unalienable human rights, most of us who live in Asia, Singapore included, tend to trust our national leaders and national interests. The basis of our trust is ensconced in our histories of colonialism, independence, survival and nationhood. As countries mature over time, shifts are seen. Societies become more individualistic and heterogeneous, often one segment at a time, before political transformation happens.

The way Singaporeans and Singapore residents have responded to COVID-19, both in day-to-day lifestyle changes, and on a visceral-emotional level, has been different from the U.S. and Western nations.

Also, in April, Singapore has enacted the COVID-19 (Temporary Measures) Act. This Act has made it possible to bring about widespread changes in our country. An act like this would be unthinkable in the U.S. and the West, where leaders continue to struggle to convince their people to wear masks and avoid social gatherings.

How shall we re-open and return?

But the time has now come for Singaporeans to come out of our circuit breaker, to re-open and to return.

Certainly, many Christians are eager to return to church after a period of disruption. We are hungry for familiarity, solace and fellowship. But we



Churches featured early in the history of the outbreak in Singapore. On Feb 25, investigators found that a married couple who attended a Chinese New Year gathering at Mei Hwan Drive was the missing link between the COVID-19 clusters at The Life Church and Missions church and Grace Assembly of God church. As the pandemic gathered steam, churches and other houses of worship around the world were advised to limit their gatherings, or shut down totally. Photo by Erick Kencana.

know that places of religious worship may be high-risk for coronavirus spread, even if we followed every piece of advice from health authorities.

We are now about one week into Phase 1. What freedoms does Phase 1 provide churches, mosques, temples, and other places of worship in Singapore?

Well, we're told that from June 2, places of worship may re-open for private worship. People may enter churches to pray individually, or together if they are from one household. No more than five from one household at any one time. No more than five households in the same house of worship at any one time. No congregational worship, no religious classes.

Weddings and funerals are allowed inside churches in Phase 1, but only ten persons can be present, and they must be family members.

Allowing private worship is a bit of a moot point in True Way. Our gates remain locked. We don't have a tradition of private worship in our church. This is true of most Protestant churches in Singapore as well.

But if you've visited cathedrals in Western countries, particularly Roman Catholic or Orthodox ones, you would have seen the spectacle of private

The basis of our trust is ensconced in our histories of colonialism, independence, survival and nationhood. As countries mature over time, shifts are seen.

worship many hours of a day, most days of the year. There's no worship service going on, but as you walked up and down the aisles, you would walk past people sitting quietly in the pews, kneeling, meditating, reading and praying. You would have seen votive candles placed before altars and statues. This is private worship.

But, for our church, nothing will change as we leave the circuit breaker for Phase 1.

Why do we have to come together again?

It's when our congregations are allowed to come together again in-person that the uncertainties re-appear. But why do we need to gather?

This is an important question to ponder.

Well, firstly, because the church is a body of believers. The church is not solo Christians, or a scattered group. Leaders have to winsomely explain the true nature of the church as a gathered people, and why it is so important to physically gather.

In a physical gathering, we experience in and through all of our senses – sight, hearing, smell, touch, taste – the holy church's embodied mission, its solid ballast and its fiery love.

Physical gathering is commanded in God's word. Heb 10: 24-25 is a key scripture about the gathered ekklesia: "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more, as you see the Day drawing near."

If we watch a service on our computers, there is no glimpse of our brother and our sister. It's just you alone, or perhaps you're with your family. What you see and hear watching a recording misses the searing grace of church, and the accompanying realisation that faith is alive, untameable and transformative. Online, all we continues on page 15

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Reopening our churches

have is a cache of intellectual statements, critical as they are, and a predictable tick-tock till the live-stream or recording comes to an end.

But gathered worship draws us deep into God's means of grace, making us a bell-tower that witnesses every Sunday to our neighbours in Queenstown. Every week that our bell does not toll is a week where a Lord's Day had come and gone without the clarion call of public worship.

So therefore, the church, properly understood, is a gathered body. Virtual church is, in an out-and-out sense, not church.

Three compelling reasons have kept us apart – public health science, laws, and our Christian duty to love our neighbour by reducing the risk of infecting him with coronavirus. We know these are good reasons. Christians are enjoined to submit to local government (Romans 13), and by not gathering for a season, our distancing lets us obey the commandment to serve our neighbour.

But at some point, after some period of distancing, we have to gather physically. The longer we go without doing that, the more it seems we would risk people drifting away, or losing touch with the incarnational meaning of church.

More problems

There are other problematic areas.

Apart from the fact that virtual church cannot feed you the way a physically gathered church does, there are things we cannot do if we don't gather physically.

We cannot conduct the Lord's Supper when there is no gathered body. We can't baptise and confirm people, or conduct business meetings. All these are parts of church life that require the presence of a church.



On 11 Feb 2020, a name was announced for the new virus that would go on to damage economies and strike down human life around the world. The name was severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). Like all coronaviruses, the new virus has characteristic club-like projections emanating from its viral membrane. Image from Unsplash.

When we bring a believer to baptism, affirming his union with Christ through the sacrament, we are performing an act that is hallowed because it is given to, and belongs to the church. It is to an embodied church that the baptised person publicly commits himself by receiving membership. When our church meets for ACM or ECM to discuss our work and mission, we give flesh to the descriptions and requisites in Matthew 16, 18, and 28 about a body of committed people who are present to, and responsible for each other.

So we can't baptize people when the church is not present, or half-present.

If the recommendation is, when it comes during Phase 2 or 3, that we should limit church services to 100 persons at any one time, we would imaginably have to do some, or all, of the following:

Paste tape crosses on our pews, permitting four congregants to a pew.

Remove, or cancel out, alternate-row pews.

Create additional services, perhaps three services on Sunday, and one or two on Saturday so that we keep people a safe distance from each other, and don't turn them away.

Instruct members and congregants to tell us beforehand which services they would choose, and explain how we would adjudicate when seats are oversubscribed. Can we still admit on a first-come, first-served basis?

Tell elderly members (should this be 60 years old, or 65?) not to come, and disappoint some of the most engaged people in our church.

Hold more Holy communion services all round. We have more than 500 communicant members on our roll. There are many baptized-in-other churches people who come to our table. Perhaps we will have to share the Lord's Supper every week, instead of once-a-month. Clearly, this decision would depend on whether we allow 100, or 50 or 25 into the sanctuary. Should we give priority of admission to communion-partakers?

If the government decides to allow only thirty to gather physically, should we start, or wait till the number goes up to 50, or 80?

To make things harder, in the published literature, there are now serious recommendations[#] for church leaders to deliberately split their congregation of, say, 500 members, into four or five

We cannot conduct the Lord's Supper when there is no gathered body. We can't baptise and confirm people, or conduct business meetings. All these are parts of church life that require the presence of a church.

distinct congregations, each with its own pastors, elders and deacons.

Each divided part becomes a full congregation. Each functions distinctly. The smaller congregations are now able to fulfill the terms of safe distancing. And because each part is a complete, intact congregation, it is now able to get baptisms and business meetings going.

This temporary strategy (perhaps nine months) is painful but it helps Christians to remember that a church is a gathering of Christians who have covenanted together to help each other follow Jesus. The new, smaller-sized church is itself an intact church with no missing part. It functions and lives as an intact body, not missing head, or toe or liver. It meets over bread and wine, it leads catechumen and witnesses to the waters of baptism, it admits people into membership, and knows every precious person is accounted for, and every beloved one present.

It may save us from forgetting what the biblical model of church is.

There's a lot more. Does True Way dismantle welcome teams, or reduce the numbers inside each team? Should we expect newcomers to be fewer now? Will unexpected newcomers who show up bust our quota?

How do we welcome people? Does a paper bulletin transmit virus?

Do we pass offering bags?

Do we dismantle the worship bands, the choir? In discussions that started two months ago, bands and choirs are problem issues identified by both medical experts and church groups. If we don't need a choir on Sunday, then we won't need them to squeeze into a small room to rehearse on Thursday. Some guidelines even suggest that singing should cease, and that people should sit and listen to recorded music. Or

[#] <https://www.9marks.org/article/has-covid-19-made-9marks-raise-the-white-flag-on-multi-site-and-multi-service-churches/>
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soloists.

What is the future of missions, evangelism, door-to-door tracting, tuition, ukulele, and outreach in True Way? If COVID-19 doesn't leave us ever, what is the future of these areas?

What do we do with our tiny church office with its very small rooms? If we're going to propose staggered work hours for church pastors and staff, what work are we truthfully talking about?

What do we do with U12 and YZ? Do we require parents to trust us with their children?

I think very likely, we won't be selling food packets once a month after the 11am service anymore.

If church doesn't reopen soon, how will we vividly describe the joy of church to our new converts?

What do we do with worried

"How will our definitions of 'essential' and 'non-essential' change when a sovereign God prunes the life of a church? What have we acquired over the years that we now have little reason to carry into the future?"

members who don't wish to attend Sunday gatherings till next January? Or March?

What is essential in church? What's non-essential? How will these definitions change when a sovereign God, through the pandemic, prunes the life of a church? What have we acquired over the years that we now have little reason to carry into the future?

I was glad when they said to me, let us go to the house of the Lord.

The work is mind-boggling.



Many churches have Sunday schools that cater to children of a wide age range. Here, communal space is shared, and separating children and teens often difficult. Church staff, volunteers and families now need to agree on a strategy for reopening. Photo by Lee Chung Horn.

When True Way reopens Sunday gatherings, we may be sure there will be a denominational recommendation, that is, one coming from the Presbyterian Synod. To be sure, this advisory will arrive with an abundance of caution. But top-down advice, however nuanced, offers uncomfortable latitude, and we would still have to pick one shade out of ten similar colours for ourselves.

So, our church leaders have to get to work. The questions that must be asked are very fact-specific but answers will carry many tones. What is

permissible in one church may be impermissible in another. What is permissible may not be wise, or loving.

And it's not just our church leaders. All of us, too, need to get to work. While we long to be the gathered church again, we need to start thinking about the scientific facts, and our own levels of anxiety about ourselves, our children, and our families. The coronavirus will stir our hearts, and cause us to ask ourselves what we understand about church polity, submission to leaders, and what obedience to God's word means. ■

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Voices from the Pandemic, Part 1

clients are not using our online platform because they do not have a private space at home.

Professional counsellor at a Methodist church, as related to a church member

HBL has been a washout. It's not that we haven't tried. My wife and I don't know how to coach, we try but we're not teachers. My boy wakes up late, so he joins the class late. The teacher has been on our backs. My wife is going crazy. Help!
Man, 40s, bank manager

We can still 'accept' the online Sunday service. But it's different. When we come

together in our familiar pews as a body of Christ before God, we feel a sense of 'holiness'. It's not there now. Do you know what I mean?

Lee Kwok Leong, church congregant

I learned how to worship online and fellowship online. Technology has provided an alternative to bridge the distance between people in the church community. My heart was warmed when my Bible Study Fellowship leader prayed for me over the phone. Pastor Kien Seng called for a Zoom meeting amongst the deacons where we shared and prayed for one another. And it was good to hear how my DG members were coping during our Zoom meetings.

Soh Lay Bin, church deacon

I miss the choral benediction. I miss the end of Sunday worship when we stand and sing to each other, 'My friends, may you grow in grace, and in the knowledge of Jesus Christ.' We have lost something.
Wong Kin Leong, church congregant

I was told it was 100 days today. It's good to know. I've lost track of time.
Wilson Fu, church congregant

Some of my Filipino friends have lost their jobs. They were sent home. People in F and B, hotels and the service sectors.
Mayden Asibor, church congregant

I hear many companies are freezing or cutting pay, removing bonuses, and

stopping hires.
Audrey Lee, church congregant

The closure of childcare was a big blow to us, because our Leah had just started there. We are expecting our second child, so we wanted Alisa to have time to rest.
Kevin Chua, church congregant

Have I personally experienced any hate speech or xenophobia after the crisis broke out? You're asking me because I'm Chinese. Well, the answer is no. Except from the White House, and constantly.
Wong Kin Leong, church congregant

How to do church funerals?
Woman, late 40s. ■

