

Staying connected during the COVID-19 pandemic

## What does it mean to be the church when we can't be together?

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In November 1918, as the Spanish flu was spreading in waves across the country, the *Century* criticized an Illinois church that had decided to conduct a public worship service against the orders of local health authorities. “When religion is inevitably tied up with a ‘meeting house,’ the closing of public worship means a separation from God,” the editors wrote. “But when religion concerns itself chiefly with human welfare interpreted from the divine standpoint, we are unwilling that one single person should die of an epidemic for the sake of an ordinance or a theory.”

A century later, American congregations are faced with similar concerns about what it means to be church during a pandemic. As a dangerous new coronavirus spreads and churches shut their doors, conversations about how to administer communion safely have shifted to a new set of questions: What might it look like to celebrate

Easter without gathering in person? How can my congregation survive the loss of Sunday offerings for so many weeks? What kind of pastoral support can we give to those members whose only social interactions happen at church? How can we keep feeding our hungry neighbors when our soup kitchen is shut down?

These questions are painful. Christianity is, at its heart, an incarnational faith. Worship embodies the belief that God's grace comes through physical contact: water trickling down a forehead, bread dissolving on a tongue, wine tickling the back of a throat, one person's hand squeezing another's. While the closing of public worship and church-based outreach don't mean separation from God, there is real grief around the suspension of these tangible forms of connection to Christ, to others, and to the world.

A global pandemic is laying bare what the church has long confessed: all people are deeply and inextricably connected to one another, like branches on a vine. In light of the mutual vulnerability our interconnection creates, many Christians are making difficult choices about how to continue to be the body of Christ in the world.

COVID-19 is laying bare what the church has long confessed: all people are connected.

The second wave of Spanish flu closures hit some congregations just as Advent was promising to give way to Christmas. On December 19, 1918, the *Century* noted one church's plans to leave Sunday school materials, booklets from the local missionary society, and instructions for home worship on front doorsteps. "Machinery has been set in motion for the use of the telephone to carry church news concerning the sick and the needy," the editors added.

One "use of the telephone" that's now emerging is the live streaming of worship services. Judicatories, church publishing houses, and musical copyright holders are assisting in these efforts. It will take our best and most creative thinking to set in motion continual care for the sick and needy as well.

It remains the church's work to nurture human connections with God and with others—even in times of physical separation. As the editors put it in 1918, "It will be a mistake to accept this as a vacation time for religion."

*A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Being the church without being together."*