

These are interesting days, indeed. This is, certainly, the first time in my lifetime anything to this scale has occurred. Phrases like “global pandemic” and “economic meltdown” were only used in video games and movies about zombies! What are we to make of it all? And, more importantly, how should it shape the way we live - as followers of Jesus, and as a church that exists as an outpost of God’s Kingdom in a physical place like Galway, Ireland?

These are the questions that the Elders and others have been thinking through over the last several weeks.

Foundational Principles:

Let me offer some underlying principles that we feel undergird some of the decisions we’ve taken. I will be communicating more on these points in the days to come.

1. What is the difference between panic and prudence? As those who trust in Jesus - believing that He is able to take us through anything in this life to the next (perhaps through a virus), we do not want to be overcome by or operate out of fear or anxiety. The Bible never apologises or seeks to explain away the presence of evil in our fallen world. Rather, it boldly affirms God’s goodness and His sovereign control in orchestrating ALL events in this world to accomplish His good purposes. If we take that at face value, it means that - in ways that we can’t understand - God’s glory is served and His goodness, when all the facts are known, will result in the accomplishment of a purpose that is eternally good, grand, and glorious. So we don’t panic. Rather, we seek to be prudent. We want to proceed with caution as responsible agents whom, in this instance, are able to do good or harm to those around us.
2. What separates this event from other disasters is the sense of shared risk. If you were to decide to come to church during a red-level storm alert, you would essentially be bearing the risk alone. It would not be shared. In this instance, however, the risk is communicable. If we gather, we are not simply putting ourselves at risk. Rather, we are risking the health of others outside our gathering who may contract something from us. Thus, we unwittingly become new vectors from which the disease continues to spread. There is nothing magical about the number 100 which was mentioned as the maximum size of indoor gatherings in the government’s directive. It isn’t as if gatherings of 99 are protected! The point is that we should take extreme measures to limit group social interaction - “social distancing” as they say. There is evidence that this will help to slow the spread of the virus, hopefully allowing the hospitals to continue to treat those affected well.
3. We do not feel that a decision to cancel services is a “neglecting” of our call to regularly gather together (as is mentioned in Hebrews 10:25 - *And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near. NLT*). This seems to be a warning of an attitude that views the physical gathering of the local church as somehow optional or unnecessary, irrespective of circumstances. Rather, cancellation would be an extreme and temporary measure. Make no mistake, digital church is not church in any full sense. We need to be physically present with one another. Bad things happen in isolation, and we need the Gospel as it is lived out as we gather together regularly. So any digital solution cannot be a longterm solution, but might be the best course as a temporary act of prudence and love.
4. This leads to the most important principle in our view. What is the best course of action in light of our call to love our neighbour? And neighbours are those inside our church as well as outside. What is the most loving response? We say that we want to extend the love of God and the Gospel into our community. This is what we pray every week: that our compassion would point people to the passion of Jesus - the Gospel. What decision best aligns with our desire to be a blessing to those around us.
Ultimately we want to do what’s best for our people, our community, and the longterm reputation of the Gospel.

Based on those principles, we have decided to take the following action:

1. We are CANCELING Sunday services at least through 29 March. It is possible that the advice of health care professionals and government officials will be to extend that date further. We will take that advice and evaluate as it comes. For now, though, we will NOT be holding physical services of any kind for the next 3 Sundays.
2. We will be offering a kind of DIY service beginning this Sunday at 11am. We will communicate some songs and Scripture readings and allow some time for private prayer. Then, at 11:30am we will be

streaming a sermon on a platform to be determined. This will be extremely weird!! And it should, because it is not the way things are meant to be. For this Sunday, however, we will just have to adjust. If you would like to take initiative and invite a few people into your home to watch the stream with you, that is up to you. Of course, we will continue to post the audio of the sermon on the website later in the day.

3. In the coming weeks we will be loosely organising - for those interested - some “micro-communities” to meet together on Sunday morning in homes to pray together, sing, and then watch the sermon live stream together. It is important that these are kept small - no more than 10 or so people - otherwise we defeat the purpose of distancing.
4. We will be communicating through our usual channels (WhatsApp/Facebook/text messages/phone calls) but we will also be sending people to our church website and the blog page (www.galwaycitychurch.com/blog). We will be updating that page on a regular basis with information and thoughts. Please help us to disseminate that information to those who might not be familiar with these technologies.
5. When we do return to regular large-scale gatherings, we will implement some practices in an effort to be vigilant about hygiene.

What we need you to do:

1. Watch the stream. Yes, it will be strange (it will be strange for me to preach to a camera!!), but please do watch and, given the platform we use for streaming, comment. It’s nice to know others are watching as well. I don’t usually plug my sermons (I believe in under-selling and over-delivering), but, in God’s providence, over the next two weeks we will be thinking about difficulty and living in a world in which we don’t have all the answers from Ecclesiastes 7. It is a timely text. Once we publish the streaming instructions, I would encourage you to invite your non-believing friends to watch as well. Please be praying that God would use these messages. Please stay tuned to the church website for more information (www.galwaycitychurch.com/blog).
2. Please let us know if you would be interested and comfortable opening your home to a small group of people on Sunday mornings to sing, pray, and watch the sermon stream together. Anyone hosting will need to be willing to communicate with those who might phone to show interest in attending as 1) we need to make sure the numbers are small and 2) we recognise that the host may need to cancel at the last minute if they become ill.
3. Take care of one another. It will be important that we communicate with one another over the phone and in person (from a metre away!) over the next few weeks on a regular basis, checking in with one another to make sure everyone is ok. This is especially true for our singles, single-moms, and older members. Please reach out, don’t assume someone else will. And, please, if a need arises, let someone know! I will be available, but please understand that I might ask someone else to follow-up with you. It’s hard to know what the next few months will look like, but we must all take responsibility to care for one another.
4. Take care of yourself. Wash your hands, quit touching your face (you’re doing it now!), keep in touch through our regular communication channels and website, get outside, and, most importantly...
5. Pray. Pray that our trust in our good and sovereign heavenly Father would be strengthened. Pray for one another. Pray that this event would serve to draw us into meaningful, smaller communities which would last for the longterm. Pray that this event would cause us to be more fervent in our evangelism; that the Gospel would go forth even through this event. As followers of Jesus, we have the assurance of eternal life even now (John 5:24 - *I tell you the truth, those who listen to my message and believe in God who sent me have eternal life. They will never be condemned for their sins, but they have already passed from death into life.* NLT), but we have friends and family members who stand on the verge of an eternity separated from God. Perhaps God would use this event to draw them to Himself.

Praying with you and for you and looking forward to being together again!

Jason and Marek

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