

Five Ways To Be The Church When Church Is Canceled

Erin Wathen Jim Gear, edit

Seems like the notion of “cancel culture” just took on a whole new dimension. School - canceled. Vacation - canceled. Basketball tournaments - canceled. Events of all kinds - canceled. In a matter of a few days, this thing has gone from “wash your hands and cover your cough” to a significant lifestyle change that most of us have not experienced in our lifetime.

Of all the cancellations, the most unnerving of all is the call to cancel worship services. This seems counterintuitive in a time when people are anxious and need community; when people are facing economic uncertainty and need support; and when people are fearful and need the comfort of prayer and connection. Yet - we have to acknowledge that “large gatherings” are a hotspot for the spread of disease. The best way to protect folks right now is to keep them apart. It’s sad. It goes against every impulse of church leaders who proclaim faith in a God who is bigger than human fear. It rubs up against the ego of those who think of themselves as hardy enough to weather any storm and get to church early to get the coffee going. Sometimes, cancelling is the responsible, compassionate thing to do, and anything else is just hubris. Think of this illness as the black ice of liability. If there is a blizzard, you might be able to get to church. But if you can’t clear the sidewalks and the parking lots, do you really want to invite people into a hazardous situation - the invisible threat that is just under the surface? **Folks who are “not sick” are going to feel like they should still come to church. But they could be carrying something they don’t know they have and pass it right on to their elderly or immunocompromised neighbor.** There is unprecedented territory ahead...



What to do now...

Support pastors and leaders in their decisions. There is no road map for this. Trust that the folks who make the call spent time in prayer, discernment, and very difficult conversations. Know that they heavily weighed consequences, including your disappointment, and ultimately did what they thought was the best thing for the wellbeing of the community. Thank them for having your best interests at heart.

Send in your pledge. This may seem like a small thing right now but trust me. It matters that you continue to get your offering in, as long as you are fiscally able. This is a great time to reexamine online giving options. If you can’t give online, mail in a check, send a carrier pigeon. Even if the building is empty, bills and salaries need to be paid; what’s more, you’re helping your church maintain mission commitments in a time when that commitment is more important than ever.

Check on your neighbors. **Your older neighbors, your neighbor on chemo, your neighbor whose kid relies on free school lunch, your neighbor who still has to go to work and could use help with childcare...Any time you help someone you are living out the values of Jesus. You are embodying what the gospel is, which takes church out of the building and brings it to lives for others. This is what we go to church to learn how to do - it is ‘for such a time as this’ that you have spent all those other Sundays in worship.**

Pray for your church family. Send notes. Make phone calls. All the things that we do for shut-ins, do for each other now that we are all shut-ins. We are one body, even when that body is not together in the flesh. There are plenty of ways to stay connected and care for each others’ needs.

Practice Sabbath. **For some, this shutdown of life as we know it is going to cause significant economic hardship. In the spirit of #3, care for your neighbor as best as you can. In the meantime, recognize if your own discomfort is just inconvenience, and keep that in perspective.** Recognize that downtime can be a gift - an imposed sabbath of time to sit still and be with your family, without the usual rush. Read together; read and watch devotionals together; prepare meals together (can you share with a neighbor? #3 and repeat); maybe even binge watch some Netflix together. When’s the last time everybody was home for this long? Talk about what you can learn from this season. Talk about your blessings. Play a game. Make something. Listen to music. Any of these things can be worshipful in their own way.

**“Cancel culture” might have a whole new meaning; but,
“let the Church be the Church” still stands.**