

The Heavenly Host Will Let You In The Meeting: Tri-Cities Churches and Covid-19

by

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Abstract:

The pandemic presented challenges American Christians had never dreamed possible. Mass gatherings, including religious ones, were deemed threats to public health. **Churches** were **closed** nationwide, including in the **Tri-Cities**. Here, in the buckle of the Bible Belt, the unthinkable happened: there were no Easter Sunday services. Governments and **churches** differed in their **virus** responses, including **closing churches** for months. Pastors and congregations were then faced with confounding questions. How can we effectively love our neighbors if we threaten their health? How do **churches** balance the physical health of their congregation with their spiritual needs? Were we effective witnesses for Christ during this time of tribulation? Where does the local **church** go from here? How did local **church** responses affect their witness today? The pandemic, while a disaster for connectedness, shows us a new way forward. Using lessons from the pandemic, local **churches** can expand traditional conceptions of worship and focus on regional reconciliation. I interviewed pastors, **church** officials, and congregants to fully portray the frayed spiritual community and see the path ahead.

Keywords - Virus, Churches, Closures, Tri-Cities

April 12th, 2020, was a muggy Easter Sunday in the Tri-Cities. The pandemic marched on, with 37 cases reported in the region and many more unreported. My Nana, a proud member

of Towering Oaks Baptist Church in Greeneville, Tennessee, was hopeless. Her beloved church was closed on Easter for the first time in her life. She is a member of a highly vulnerable population group that comprises most of her church. Her Sunday School group in particular is composed of some of her greatest friends, a tight-knit community that plays rook often, brings one another meals, and studies and worships together. They all are highly vulnerable to COVID-19 and could not risk meeting together. This led to a distinct loss of connection which fueled deep loneliness in her and many others in her Sunday School group. They didn't have the means to Zoom, and even if they could, they felt it wouldn't be the same. This continued for months as more contracted the virus and more died. Without the church and the institutional connectedness it provides, so many people faced the dire situation my Nana did. Here, in the buckle of the Bible Belt, the institution so many relied on, the church, was faced with an untenable situation. Jesus commands us to love our neighbors as ourselves in Matthew 22:39. Churches had to discern how to love their neighbor as Christ would while a deadly virus ravaged their congregation and communities. Paul further encourages Christians in Hebrews 10:25 to "not neglect to gather together." Churches then had to decide how to "gather" safely together and what "gathering" truly means, with a significant number of local churches moving to online or outdoor services. However, many felt these were hollow shells of their worship before the virus. Pastors, priests, and church leaders had to make complex, potentially life-altering choices about when and how to gather. Their decisions were influenced by the frayed political environment of 2020, a highly contentious election year. Conservative churches tended to open to in-person worship sooner than their liberal counterparts. The consequences of Covid on spirituality have not been examined thoroughly, but there has certainly been a documented loss of church membership and self-identifying Christians, with the Tri-Cities being no exception. But, forced to embrace new,

online worship and more personalized ministry, churches see a path forward. Christians can rise above division and be a source of unity locally. Using lessons from the pandemic, local churches can expand traditional conceptions of worship and focus on regional reconciliation.

It is hard to capture the uncertainty that so many felt at the beginning of the pandemic. Questions such as “how prevalent is the virus,” “how deadly is it,” and “how long could this last?” were asked. We had no clear answers. Churches had to discern for themselves how to go forward. March 2020 was the first month of the virus in the region, and case numbers were low, but testing was also scarce, and transmissibility was unknown. As nearly everything in the area ground to a halt, so did church services. Almost all churches canceled services initially, many with hopes the spread would reduce and things would return to normal.¹ Things did not return to normal.

A common critique of my research could be why do churches matter? A non-Christian may argue that churches are patently nonessential and, during the pandemic, dangerous vectors of transmission. They have a fair point. But for so many in the area, like my Nana, churches are the most essential part of their being. Churches are pillars of the community, integral places of gathering and connection. To even a non-Christian, our local churches have their value. Churches are homeless shelters, counseling centers, and polling places, and during a time of crisis, a place of immense peace and comfort. The church’s absence has enormous consequences for a community, even for those who do not attend or subscribe to a religion. Churches matter because people look for answers and a sense of community there, and these weren’t easy to come by during this time.

COVID and Our Region

¹ Robinette, Eddie. Personal interview with author. October 21, 2022.

It is important to set the scene. The virus was particularly ruthless in our state and region. On April 1st, just a week before Easter 2020, case rates were increasing nearly 30% more than the week before.² That November, Jeff Keeling at WJHL³ reported that “Northeast Tennesseans are dying from COVID-19 at a per capita rate nearly triple the state average over the past week — and that rate has doubled regionally in just 11 days.”⁴ As Christmas approached, he reported that “The first half of December, Ballad hospitals averaged 56 people a day with COVID in ICU -- up 36% from the last half of November. Patients on ventilators were up 22%.”⁵ By Christmas, nearly 850 people had died from the virus in our region.⁶ Our averages were almost always higher than statewide and nationwide averages. By Easter 2021, Northeast Tennessee still outpaced the rest of the state in positivity and death rates, even with vaccines becoming highly available.⁷ Our region also greatly lagged behind in vaccination rates. As the virus mutated, rates increased evermore in the summer of 2021. On August 24, 2021, Keeling reported that Northeast Tennessee had 12.5 deaths per 100,000 people, while Tennessee had 7.1. The nationwide average was 4.6. In August 2021 alone, we averaged 20 deaths per 100,000 while the state averaged 10.9 and the nation averaged 7.5.⁸ During this time, many churches were reopened and

² Keeling, Jeff. Twitter post. April 1, 2020. 3:14 P.M.

<https://twitter.com/JeffKeeling12/status/1245429345092583425>

³ Jeff Keeling’s work was invaluable to my research, as he compiled all his data from the Tennessee and Virginia Departments of Health and the CDC, presenting them on WJHL and his Twitter.

⁴ Keeling, Jeff. Twitter post. November 9, 2020. 4:50 P.M.

<https://twitter.com/WJHL11/status/1325918610431352832>

⁵ Keeling, Jeff. Twitter post. December 15, 2020. 1:57 P.M.

<https://twitter.com/JeffKeeling12/status/1338921191801819140>

⁶ Keeling, Jeff. Twitter post. December 23, 2020. 5:34 P.M.

<https://twitter.com/JeffKeeling12/status/1341874873115815936>

⁷ Keeling, Jeff. Twitter post. April 14, 2021. 1:05 P.M.

<https://twitter.com/JeffKeeling12/status/1382379549963476994>

⁸ Keeling, Jeff. Twitter post. August 24, 2021. 5:21 P.M.

<https://twitter.com/JeffKeeling12/status/1430279200699715589>

lifting protocols.⁹ By Christmas 2021, nearly 1,600 locals had died of the virus. While the virus has undoubtedly slowed, it remains, as we have a low vaccination rate compared to other areas. Our region was one of the hardest hit in all of the United States, which certainly factored into many churches' decision-making.

Hopwood - The Communitarian Approach

Churches forged their own path of reopening based primarily on congregational concerns. A tremendous example of this was Hopwood Christian Church on Milligan's campus. Dr. John Jackson, professor of Bible at Milligan University and Hopwood's Director of Worship, outlined Hopwood's very cautious approach compared to other area churches. The leadership at the church immediately convened a "safety committee," comprised of medical professionals, doctors, and nurses that attended the church. The committee paid close attention to Covid numbers, including positivity rates, hospitalization, and death rates, as well as current CDC guidelines. Dr. Jackson emphasized that Carter County had a very high death rate compared with the state and nationwide averages, which weighed heavily on Hopwood's decision-making. Hopwood also has a relatively small sanctuary, so distancing was a problem. They decided, in essence, to do their standard services but without any congregants present. They would stream it on Facebook Live, beginning on Palm Sunday 2020. The streaming would continue until the Fourth of July when they had an outdoor service in the commuter parking lot near the Faculty Office Building of the nearby Milligan campus. This would become untenable as the summer heat became oppressive, beating down on the older congregants. They continued experimenting with outdoor worship, settling on their church parking lot.

⁹ Cockerham, Amy. "Local Churches Take Precautions, Encourage Vaccination as Covid-19 Cases Surge." WJHL, August 30, 2021. <https://www.wjhl.com/news/local/local-churches-take-precautions-encourage-vaccination-as-covid-19-cases-surge/>.

The virus forced Hopwood to embrace new technologies like streaming their services. First, they had to learn how to set up a worship stream and make it as user-friendly as possible, especially for their older congregants. Dr. Jackson explained that it was a relatively straightforward process once they set up the technology. Good things have come from streaming. Dr. Jackson's children, while out of town, could tune in on Facebook. Hopwood continues to stream their services today, which has been a valuable tool for shut-ins. They live-streamed their traditional Sunrise Service on Easter Sunday at the graveyard on Milligan's campus. While it was obviously not the same as in-person worship, he emphasized they were "doing the best they could with the information we had at the time."¹⁰

Dr. Jackson contends that throughout the pandemic, Hopwood's main goal was to love one another by keeping one another safe. As a result, they remained closed far longer than almost any church in the area. At the same time, they had no known transmissions from the church, a stark contrast to many congregations. But, even they were not immune to the virus, with one member dying, an older gentleman who had been very cautious. Nearly every family at Hopwood was infected at some point. The "safety committee" was very reluctant to reopen until vaccines were readily available, so the thought of indoor services was not really on the table. The main thing holding them back was the children in the congregation. Children were not approved for the shot until after seniors and adults, so many parents were reluctant to go back in person, especially in the small sanctuary and little Sunday school rooms. Nearly their entire congregation is vaccinated, so in late 2021 they felt comfortable enough to return to indoor worship, but masked. Furthermore, their "safety committee" paid close attention to CDC guidelines and local

¹⁰ Jackson, John. Personal interview with author. October 20, 2022.

numbers and recommended further actions. As spikes occurred, they changed their protocols and went back online.

Dr. Jackson also spoke about how they had to seek new avenues of ministry. To preserve connections, they made a conscious effort to visit more shut-ins, especially the more at-risk church members. He also mentioned continuing to “try to be more intentional” about visiting other church members to check in and preserve connections. In addition, outdoor, distanced small groups were created. These groups were crucial for spiritual development, maintaining relationships that would have weakened over zoom. They had varying levels of success with these groups; some caught on, and some slowly fizzled out, but many of these groups still meet, a testament to the church’s perseverance.

Throughout it all, Hopwood took a “communitarian” approach during the pandemic. A “communitarian” approach, as outlined in Dr. Jaelyn Neo’s research of Covid responses by religious groups, takes the community's needs first instead of a “rights-based” response.¹¹ They largely followed CDC guidelines and the recommendations of their safety committee. Their attendance has declined, but not at the cataclysmic rate of other local churches. They still have a “few hundred members.” This is primarily due to the shared commitment by members. The congregation was all in on the cautious approach, so there was not the sort of discontent you would’ve seen in politically-divided churches. Hopwood could be fairly described as a more politically liberal church, which explains their precautions. Nationwide, it is clear that more liberal-leaning churches embraced CDC policies and closures. Hopwood was no exception, but the congregation were comfortable with these policies. They indeed were not pleased with the

¹¹ Neo, Jaelyn L., and Shanzly Ramlan. “Covid-19 and Religious Organisations: Constitutional Environment and Organisational Choices.” Edited by Abdullah Saeed and Paul Hedges. S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep40183>.

spread of the virus and not meeting together, but above all, tried their best to keep each other safe. Hopwood's ever-cautious approach is a reminder that Covid is still with us. People are still afflicted, still on ventilators, and still dying. Hopwood remains vigilant, with the love of Jesus guiding every decision.

Blountville Church of God - The Congregational Approach

Blountville Church of God, a small, rural church near Bristol, Tennessee, reflects the loss experienced throughout the region. Pastor Eddie Robinette has been the preacher for a few years, presiding over a small but faithful congregation. Pastor Robinette had multiple Zoom calls with state Church of God leadership in Cleveland, Tennessee, who advised their ministers on protocol strategies. Ultimately, they left it up to the individual congregations. Blountville earnestly desired to return to in-person worship as soon and safely as possible. "It was actually the older members who wanted to return to in-person the most," Pastor Robinette told me.¹² The church would both seek to love the best they could while recognizing the importance of gathering together, as Paul implores us in Hebrews 10.

Easter Sunday, 2020, was their first in-person service in the church's parking lot. They, and their congregants, never looked back. With only sixty members, it was easy to distance and stay separated.¹³ Ultimately, it was the choice of the congregants on whether or not to gather. For so many in the church, online church was not a suitable substitute for in-person worship. The "experiential" aspect of worship could not be replicated on Facebook Live. They decided it was worth the risk. Still, the church introduced online elements for those unable or unwilling to attend. They had not live-streamed their services before the virus, but they decided to try it

¹² Robinette, Eddie. Personal interview with author. October 21, 2022.

¹³ Robinette, Eddie. Personal interview with author. October 21, 2022.

during this time. They found it easy to set up and navigate on Facebook Live, and they continue the practice to this day. It has been both a blessing and a curse. Pastor Robinette says it is nice to have services available for shut-ins, especially with virus realities. Live-streaming is also a valuable tool for those out of town, like missionaries. But, there is a clear downside. “Online church” has provided a useful opportunity for those who wished to leave the church. They can tune in on Facebook, have no interaction with the church locally or at large, and leave without any issue. Those wanting to leave could do so much easier than before, and the effects of this are enormous.

Before Covid, Blountville averaged about sixty for Sunday services. They now average thirty. Their attendance has been cut in half. The numbers in the statewide Church of God are even more staggering. The state board estimates a loss of nearly 60-70% of churchgoers.¹⁴ This exodus from the church has been a disaster and is reflected in regionwide attendance numbers. Pastor Robinette mentioned in our interview that among the numerous ill effects of Covid, beyond the physical ones, the spiritual ones are vast and hard to quantify. “It has certainly been a tool of the enemy to get people out of the church,” Robinette said. Covid brought isolation and disconnection to the forefront of American life. Folks were locked down and shut down, with a deadly virus raging around them. Americans questioned institutions more than ever before, like governments and health care providers. And very clearly, they have not only questioned but rejected the church. But, hope remains for Blountville Church of God. Pastor Robinette believes it will force the church to take a more “evangelistic” approach. Those that stay in the church have a monumental task ahead of them, but it unites them with the early church. They will seek out and save the lost, to make the Great Commission real in their communities and lives.

¹⁴ Robinette, Eddie. Personal interview with author. October 21, 2022.

Marvin's Chapel United Methodist Church - A Changing Approach

The United Methodist Church is emblematic of the deep societal rifts the church is undergoing. A great split is underway between conservative and liberal bishops, ministers, and churches over homosexual ordination, among other things. The schism is on a global scale, and the worldwide United Methodist Church seems headed for separation. It is in this environment that the church found itself in early 2020 when the pandemic began. Unlike most regional churches, individual United Methodist churches do not have congregational autonomy. They do not choose their ministers; the local bishop does, moving pastors around when they see fit. In addition, local churches did not decide to close or reopen during the pandemic, the bishop did. And he closed them much longer than people anticipated.

Pastor Joel Cook of Marvin's Chapel United Methodist Church in Boone's Creek was very open about the detrimental effects Covid had on their ministry. "It killed us," he told me during our interview.¹⁵ Before Covid, they averaged about a hundred on a given Sunday. They are down to sixty now. The story is the same for other United Methodist Churches in the region. Asbury United Methodist in Greeneville, Tennessee, had about three to four hundred every Sunday. They now have nearly sixty. Telford United Methodist Church, the church behind my home, where so many kids I grew up with attended, went from sixty to twelve members, with no children in the youth ministry. Combine the already simmering theological issues with a pandemic, and churches were ready to burst.

The Methodists also took a hyper-cautious approach, similar to Hopwood. The Regional Bishop closed all churches indefinitely at the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020. Pastor Cook attributed this to our "simply not knowing that much about the virus at the time. We

¹⁵ Cook, Joel. Personal interview with author. October 28, 2022.

thought, like we were told, it would be a “three weeks to slow the spread” kind of thing.”¹⁶ That did not happen. The weeks turned into months, and for Methodists, into years. Easter Sunday, 2020, would debut “Facebook church” at Marvin’s Chapel. Live-streaming would become the norm until the Bishop allowed local churches to meet outside as safely as possible. A local businessman donated a large tent to the church, which was much appreciated. In a strange sort of irony, it was a forced return to the tent revivalism that birthed so many Methodist churches down south nearly two hundred years ago. When the weather was mild, they had services and business meetings out under the tent, but as the fall turned into the bitter cold of winter, they had to return to “Facebook church.”

Lone bright spots were “Facebook church,” and that giving remained close to the same level. Committed members tuned into the live stream and continued tithing. Marvin’s Chapel continues to live stream to this day. Live streaming was also a critical tool for shut-ins when they finally returned to in-person worship. Shut-in ministry was also a challenge, but, like Hopwood, Marvin’s Chapel was more intentional about making efforts to connect with its shut-ins. Nursing homes were shut down to visitation for a long time, so making a concerted effort to call those in them or do “window visits” was a top priority for the church.

The Bishop kept the Methodist churches closed longer than any other local mainline denomination. Many congregants looked elsewhere as the online services continued into 2022. Pastor Cook put it bluntly, “why stay here when you can go down the road to an open church?”¹⁷ Covid canceled the worldwide Methodist conference, which would finalize the split over homosexual affirmation, by three years. As Covid also prolonged church closures, divisions over

¹⁶ Cook, Joel. Personal interview with author. October 28, 2022.

¹⁷ Cook, Joel. Personal interview with author. October 28, 2022.

both affirmation and closure policies deepened. Many resolved to leave the United Methodist Church and go to the upstart Global Methodists (the conservative, non-affirming offshoot), which began in 2022. By the time the Bishop allowed some congregational autonomy and allowed the churches themselves to decide if they wanted to reopen in person, it was too late. Many local United Methodist churches are already in the three-month “discernment” period church leadership mandates when a church indicates its desire to leave. Churches have until December 2023 to decide if they want to leave the worldwide United Methodists. Marvin’s Chapel is currently in the “discernment” period. Mt. Zion United Methodist in Greeneville is nearly at the end of the process of leaving as a result of the split and Covid policy. Many other local United Methodist churches are in the same boat. United Methodist churches have hemorrhaged countless members and immeasurable forms of unity and goodwill. The United Methodist Church in the Tri-Cities will never be the same.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Across the broad spectrum of denominations in our region, a common theme has emerged: disconnection. So many of the ministers and church members I spoke to commented on how online church has heightened divisions in their congregations and led to mass exits. Many local churches lacked enthusiasm and regular attendees before the pandemic, so going online only made these problems worse. Many Christians argue that it gave many an easy opportunity to leave without dealing with shame or guilt. While these views are reasonable, they do not uncover the core reasons so many left the church during this time. In the face of so much death and destruction, Christianity seemed distant and aloof. During a time of great social upheaval,

we retreated into our old way of doing things: services on Sunday and Wednesday, singing a few songs, potlucks after church, go home, rinse, repeat. Pastor Robinette remarked that to get not only these people back but to get new people in the pews, we need to take a more evangelistic approach.¹⁸ We need to meet people where there are. And that means learning from the lessons the virus taught us.

“Facebook church” can be a useful tool for those unable to attend, and most practically, to connect people who may not just walk in on Sunday. How many people may be searching for a church and could see a live stream and be called to visit in person the next week? Pastor Lester Morelock of First Baptist Jonesborough said that at the beginning of the pandemic, they averaged about one hundred and forty-five. He said they now have about one hundred and forty-five, but a different one hundred and forty-five. He said that while some congregants left the church or had health issues (it was a very old congregation two years ago), they gained a great number of new congregants who actually discovered the church on Facebook Live.¹⁹ He said the pandemic was actually a tremendous opportunity for ministry. “The faithful wife who attended church every week while her husband stayed home now could stream the service and witness to him,” he told me. The church could go into more homes than ever possible thanks to “Facebook church.” Furthermore, being separated reminded us to “be intentional” with shut-ins and home visits, as Dr. Jackson said.²⁰ When nursing home visitations were not allowed, it calls us to show these people the love of Christ. He didn’t just bless the lepers from afar. He touched them. We can’t just pray for those on the margins of our society, we need action. We need to find them, minister to them, to show them how disciples of Jesus Christ are supposed to act. We need to be

¹⁸ Robinette, Eddie. Personal interview with author. October 21, 2022.

¹⁹ Morelock, Lester. Personal interview with author. November 4, 2022.

²⁰ Jackson, John. Personal interview with author. October 20, 2022.

more intentional about connecting with those cut off from our congregations and the world at large, either by illness, economic, or social reasons. The lost are not going to pile into church now that we are back open. Pastor Morelock said something in our interview that has stayed with me. During the pandemic's height, we had two choices to make as a church: "we could sit here, wringing our hands complaining about the virus and the government, or we could rest in the sovereignty of God." Scripture tells us that the Gospel will ultimately prevail. "Covid has made us really be the church, as we were called to be," Pastor Morelock said. Being the church means taking the Gospel to the world and ministering to those on the outside of our society. We must live out the Great Commission in our own lives and seek out and save the lost. If we do that, maybe we too can feel a deeper spiritual connection as a community.

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