# Preaching during Covid

The churches: We do not cancel, we adjust. The PhD studying the digitally mediated practices of the church will have to adjust accordingly -> preaching during Covid.

**Digitally mediated worship services.**

Comparison of how churches made the adjustment to digital services in the beginning of the Covid crisis. Sweden, Britain, Hong Kong and Singapore. Jonas Kurlberg at CODEC Centre for Digital theology in Durham and Alexander Chow, an Asian Digital theologian. Found that Sweden differed in many ways. Very little creative work in the digital space, mostly just put up a camera in a corner of the room and broadcasted the usual Sunday service on Youtube or Facebook live. Interviewed a pastor in CoS who refused digital worship services at all. The third most digitalized country in the world – why?

These findings correspond to other observations.

Preliminary statistics from the Swedish part of the CONTOC-study: almost 80% of the congregations in CoS offered one digitally mediated worship service. Around 60% did it twice or more.

My own as well as the almost 200 analyses of digitally mediated Sunday services that my students did as the final assignment for the summer course “Church and Theology in a time of Pandemic” that we gave at UCS this summer. The students used the concepts introduced by Heidi Campbell (one of the most renowned scholars in the field of digital religion) in her anthology *Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing church Online* that was published during the spring. In this anthology she pulls together both practitioners and researchers in the field of digital religion and theology to reflect on the initial weeks of the pandemic.

In her own contribution to the anthology she introduces the concepts *transfer-translate-transform* to describe worship services online. Transfer (doing exactly the same thing as in the local church), Translation strategy (modifying the worship rituals to fit into a limited screen, including limited modes of interaction) and transform (rethink the essence of the church – what do members need – and transform the services accordingly). Relates this to her earlier research about online church community. She writes: “These online church experiments were closest to what my research spoke of nearly twenty years ago. Successful online communities and church experiences are those that cultivate social relationships and investment from their members.”

The students found that the most common thing in the Swedish churches was *Transfer strategy*. *Translation* occurred occasionally. Only two examples of *transform* – both from Stockholm.

Why? Kurlberg & Chow – and I do think that they are correct in their analysis – three reasons:

* The restrictions in Sweden – different from most other countries. International conference one of the keynote lecturers held up a face mask and said that wherever we came from, we had this in common, and I thought: not everyone… Until this week, up to 50 people have been able to gather if it is possible to keep distance. Both in the local and digital room, the local room takes precedence. This might change – since yesterday no more than 8 people can gather. Perhaps this will prompt a change in digital practices?
* Theological reasons – CoS highly influenced by the liturgical and ecumenical movements- The liturgical assembly in the local church, the worshipping community manifesting the body of Christ as they gather around the altar to receive the Eucharist – the theological backbone. As many digital theologians have pointed out: theologians influenced by the liturgical movement tend to be suspicious of digitally mediated practices. This is due to the presumption that they are non-physical and as such, a threat to incarnational theology. As many digital theologians also have pointed out, this is a misconception. Still, it could be a contributing factor for the Swedish situation.
* Practical reasons. Kurlberg & Chow refer to an interview with a Swedish theologian who says that one important reason is care for the elderly who does not know how to handle technology. It is easier for them if the same service as usual is broadcasted with no way to interact. Kurlberg & Chow are a bit sceptical to this explanation, since they can see what churches in the other countries did – they instead helped the elderly to obtain the necessary technology and taught them to handle it.

A fourth reason that these authors did not mention, but one that has come across as I have been lecturing about this – also supported by the preliminary results from the CONTOC-survey – is that it is also a matter of the pastors attitude towards technology. If the pastors have used digital technology before and are comfortable using it, they are far more prone to take advantage of it. Thus, the transfer strategy could be due to the fact that this was the easiest solution.

There are many more thing to say about worship services in the digital room during Covid, but as the topic of today is preaching we will move on to that.

**Preaching during early stages of Covid**

My PhD colleague Clara Nystrand in Lund, also in the field of homiletics, is conducting a large study of what kind of experiences preachers in the church of Sweden refer to in their sermons. Unfortunately, she had chosen 2020 as the year to gather her material… her first round of gathering material was planned to lent and easter… There is of course only one experience that the preachers relate to and that is the pandemic. In a forthcoming article, she presents a couple of recurring themes:

Fear and worry are the dominant description of the situation, and God is described as being “next” to humans in this situation. We are not alone, God is with us. The theme of “do not be afraid” or “fear not” in the Bible texts are important in the sermons.

This corresponds to the results in a South African study of preaching during Easter. First author Marileen Steyn and the rest of the authors have looked into the preaching strategy, and proposes a model for preaching in a time of crisis. Both articles will be published in the forthcoming issue of *International Journal of Homiletics* that I recommend you have a look at if you are more interested in results and data.

Among other things, Steyn and he colleagues found that preachers commonly worked with the contrast between the “experienced reality” that everyone is far and fear is near, and the “proclaimed reality” that death is far and God is near. For the listeners to be able to discern this proclaimed reality, the preachers encouraged habits of faith. This enticed lament and celebrating the Eucharist at home, but in particular “serviceability”, the care for others. (Steyn et al. forthcoming).

This also corresponds to my pre-Covid research. Preachers in Hillsong church, a community highly affected by the digital culture and space. The trope of human worry, trouble and anxiety and a God who is close, standing next to you, helping you to discover the truth about yourself – that you are loved and capable and safe – is repeated in every sermon. This could be related to a larger study from Britain about Bible use, conducted by Pete Phillips, director of the centre for Digital theology. He studied how people use the Bible in digital spaces – apps like Youversion – what verses they marked, liked, shared, commented. Changes over time from what he calls “propositional content” like Joh 3:16 towards what he calls “practice oriented” or “therapeutical” content like Jer 29:11 or Fil. I can do all thing through Christ that strengthens me. Phillips is careful to point out that digitalization is far from the only factor driving this change, but it might contribute. Especially since there is so much interaction with the practice-oriented content – it gets more likes, comments and shares – which indicates that this kind of faith content is encouraged in a digital culture and space.

However, Phillips study was made pre-Covid, and in his recent *Hybrid Church* he writes that there has been a temporal increase of interaction with propositional content after the first months of the Covid crisis. Is something changing?

In the article about the South African situation, Steyn refers to the preachers depicted in Albert Camus novel *The Plague* and points to how his preaching changed over time. The theology in the sermon he held at the beginning of the plague differs a lot from the theology in the sermon he held at the end of the plague. It becomes much more complex and nuanced. She asks if this could be the case with preaching during Covid as well?

Hopefully, we homileticians will be able to tell quite soon. Pointing in that direction is the results I got from a smaller study of sermons from Ascension and Sunday before Pentecost. I studied how 32 preachers from CoS and the reformed Uniting Church of Sweden (a merger of Methodist, Mission Covenant and Baptist churches in Sweden) theologized on the digital room and the pandemic. While the theme of “God is near and worry are far away” were still very important, there were some very interesting themes that emerged.

* Some of the preachers had started to talk about an absence in presence. The experience of the absence of God or Christ was discussed. Human and divine presence had started to be described as mediated – not explicitly, but the way that presence was described pointed to this kind of understanding.
* The common way to interpret Ascension – that the body of Christ is now found in the local community and in the Eucharist – had given way to reflections on church universal and eschatology.

Not much talk about space and place. Rare to mention where the body of Christ was (gone or disappeared), difficult to describe the concept of the Kingdom of God (not here, not of this world). Is this due to a digital era and space? Theologians like Douglas Farrow and Vitor Westhelle: this is a common trait for all 20th Century theology. Nothing new! Rather: it is remarkable that reflections upon space occur at all. This could be an indication that the experiences made from the pandemic and the digital space have caused preachers to start reflecting on these matters.

The question “where is the church” is prominent in the research material that I am currently looking into. Early in the outbreak of the pandemic, Växjö diocese initiated the gathering of material from local communities in the region in order to be able to study the course of the crisis. Through a collaboration between the diocese, Lund University, University College Stockholm and the Academy of Leadership and Theology we now have a material from almost 20 Lutheran, reformed and Pentecostal communities in this area – surveys, worship services, information material and diaries (soon to be completed with in-depth interviews) – that describe the development of the situation.

As we are still in the process of gathering material, all results are very preliminary. But one interesting observation is the question of “where is the church?”. It is commonly described as a problem that one struggles with: where is the church or how can there even *be* church if there are no local worship services and Eucharist? (Yes, that was a recurring question also for the reformed and Pentecostal communities as well.) At the same time rich descriptions of how the church activity had moved to other spaces: the public space, the home and the digital space. Differences: the CoS talked mainly about the public and digital space, the reformed and Pentecostals referred to the home and digital.

This confirms the findings from pre-Covid research about the digital space as *complimentary* to other spaces. In Sweden, some theologians have weathered worries that the digital space will compete with the local room (now that they have discovered that they can do church at home in their pyjama, they will not come back to the local church and the local community is threatened!) but it seems that this is not true even if the main local space is closed down. There are other spaces that the digital space collaborates with.