

The Bible, faith formation and a virus – Exploring the influence of a pandemic on faith formation content and practices for children and teenagers

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The SARS-CoV-2 virus has posed different kinds of challenges to society and churches over the past months. With various 'normal ministry practices' not permitted under lockdown regulations, as well as people starting to fear the effect of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), a sense of crisis can easily prevail. However, a small congregation in Bloemfontein, South Africa, responded by engaging their children and teenagers through reflection, content and outreach. Various methods, including virtual and face to face, were utilised to minister to and with children and teenagers. This response can now be analysed to find answers to the following questions: How did the pandemic influence specific methods chosen for faith formation? What made it different from 'ministry as usual'? What role did the Bible play in the methods and content used? Within the framework of the qualitative research, reflective practice from a hermeneutic perspective was utilised as theoretical approach to analyse the response of the pastors and Sunday school teachers. Reflection occurs on three levels, namely, technical (efficiency and effectiveness), practical (goals and consequences) and critical (analysis of one's practice within wider contexts). A literature study was also conducted on the influence of a pandemic on faith formation. Recommendations were made regarding different ways to engage with children and teenagers and involving them in ministry.

Contribution: This research contributes to knowledge as to how and why pastors and congregations react the way they do in a pandemic and how this impacts upon faith formation among children and youth in the faith community.

Keywords: faith formation; reflective practice; pandemic; Bible; virtual.

Introduction

The SARS-CoV-2 virus has posed different kinds of challenges to society and churches over the past months. With various 'normal ministry practices' not permitted under lockdown regulations, as well as people starting to fear the effect of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), a sense of crisis can easily prevail. As Verhoef, Du Toit and Du Preez (2020:150) state: '[T]he COVID-19 pandemic is a multifaceted crisis that permeates all dimensions of human life and challenges the very nature of our existence'. A pandemic has far-reaching effects on the health system, economy and various other aspects of a society. Communion with God and others plays a very important role in faith formation (Matthaei 2004:58). Challenged by the restrictions of lockdown, one has to rethink faith formation. What kind of influence does a pandemic have on faith formation? What role does the Bible play in people's lives during such a time? The COVID-19 virus that hit the world since December 2019 has made many congregations and pastors rethink their ministry.

This article aims to analyse pastors' responses to faith formation of children and teenagers during pandemic times. It reflects upon the decisions made regarding faith formation. How did the pandemic influence the specific methods chosen for faith formation? What made it different from 'ministry as usual'? What role did the Bible play in the methods and content used?

A pandemic and faith formation

The pandemic of COVID-19 can be viewed as a blizzard, winter or a mini ice age (Crouch, Keilhacker & Blanchard 2020:n.p.). If the pandemic is considered a blizzard, it is a disruptive event that must simply be endured until it is over. Viewing the pandemic as winter, it is a new season that will last for a while. A mini ice age, on the other hand, hails in a new era. Irrespective of whether a church considers the pandemic as a blizzard, winter or a mini ice age, it will influence

Note: Special Collection: From timely exegesis to contemporary ecclesiology: Relevant hermeneutics and provocative embodiment of faith in a Corona-defined world – Festschrift for Stephan Joubert, sub-edited by Willem Oliver (University of South Africa).

its response to the situation. Many churches were forced to move to an online mode of ministry (Campbell 2020:n.p.). This entailed, amongst others, live streaming of church services and group meetings on Zoom and other virtual platforms. Many online workshops were also arranged to help pastors think theologically about the challenge of the pandemic. One example is the online workshops organised by Ekerk with the following themes: 'Nie "pause" nie, maar "reset": Geloof en Kerk geleaf in COVID-19-tyd [Not "pause", but "reset": Faith and church lived in Covid-19 times]', 'Deel met [sic] nuwe werklikhede [Deal with new realities]', 'New church and relevant theology for a new time' (cf. Digital Learning Community 2020a, 2020b and 2020c).

Faith formation can be described as our participation in God's work of inviting persons into relationship with God, self, others and creation (Matthaei 2004:57). For faith formation to take place, an effective, intentional, live-giving ecology of faith formation is needed within a faith community. This ecology includes relationships, structures and practice (Matthaei 2004:56). There should be a relationship between the youth and the adult teaching them (beginning with knowing their names). They should also pray together. Structures include opportunities for one-on-one teaching, worship events, small group discussions, etc. Practice refers to the example of the Christian life as well as opportunities to minister to people in need. Developing such an ecology for faith formation has its challenges during a pandemic and its influence on society.

According to Roberto (2020), the pandemic has shown:

[H]ow fragile faith formation approaches and programming were and how dependent they were on fixed time programming in physical spaces at church facilities and in the other locations (retreat houses, service/mission project locations, etc.). (p. 4)

To adapt to this new situation, Roberto (2020:5–19) suggests five building blocks that can be used to redesign faith formation in a time like this:

1. Focus on goals for faith maturing at each stage of life and design programming to address the goals.
2. Integrate three faith-forming environments: intergenerational community, family and age or peer group in all programming.
3. Design faith formation in three seasonal menus of programming.
4. Design faith formation using online and blended approaches, eventually incorporating programming in physical settings when conditions allow.
5. Design playlists of faith-forming content and experiences for all ages to structure faith formation programming.

In the uncertain times of the pandemic, it is helpful to do the following in the context of a congregation (Smit 2020a:n.p.):

1. Be visible.
2. Communicate honestly and with compassion.
3. Focus on what needs to be done for now.
4. See the crisis as an opportunity.
5. Show appreciation to your fellow colleagues for their contribution.

Faith formation described in the previous paragraphs refers to the general concept of faith formation of all age groups. However, as described in the following paragraphs, children and youth have special needs regarding faith formation in unusual times (e.g. during pandemics). Not only on a structured level of shaping faith formation, but also on a pastoral level, the youth need support in times such as these. The youth must experience that the pastor is journeying with them in these difficult times. They are experiencing a sense of loss, because those things that gave them identity (chatting with friends at school, playing rugby, band practice, etc.) were taken away by the lockdown regulations of the pandemic. This can lead to depression and existential questions about the identity and being (Smit 2020b:n.p.). These issues should be addressed in appropriate ways.

Another factor of the pandemic and some of the lockdown regulations is that children and the youth had much more 'out-of-school time' on hand. The available leisure time increased, but the ability to participate in structured leisure decreased. Leisure plays an important role in the lives of children and the youth. It provides opportunities for self-actualisation and meaning (Ettetal & Agans 2020:2). In the previous paragraph, it was also noted that the youth find their identity in many of these activities and this can be experienced as a great loss during lockdown because of a pandemic.

Reflecting on faith formation ministry practices

Reflective practice

Within the framework of qualitative research, the researcher reflects on the changes made to faith formation of children and youth in the researcher's congregation. 'Reflecting means to elucidate the epistemic acts developed in the midst of the inquiry process' (Mortari 2015:1). Some scholars question the value of reflective practice in research (e.g. Patai 1994). However, Mortari (2015:2) comes to the conclusion that mindfulness 'on one's own practices gives value to any kind of inquiry'. There are various philosophical approaches to reflective practice, for example the pragmatist perspective, the critical perspective and the phenomenological perspective (Mortari 2015:3). In this research, reflective practice from a hermeneutic perspective¹ is utilised as a theoretical approach to analyse the response of the pastors. 'It is the task of hermeneutics or phenomenology to make visible the meaning structures embedded in the lifeworlds which belong to the human expressions under study' (Van Manen 1977:215). In the current study, a choice is made within the hermeneutic perspective to reflect on three levels (Merickel 1998:n.p.; Van Manen 1977:226–227):

1. First level: Technical rationality.

At this level, efficiency and effectiveness are reflected upon. Effective (adj.) is understood as being adequate to accomplish

1. Hermeneutics refers to the activity of interpretation (Tomkins & Eatough 2018). Different methods could be used to interpret a situation or text.

a purpose, producing the intended or expected result. Efficient (adj.) refers to performing or functioning in the best possible manner with the least waste of time and effort (Insight Squared 2020:n.p.):

2. Second level: Practical action.

At this level, the goals and consequences are reflected upon:

3. Third level: Critical reflection.

At this level, one analyses one's practice within a wider context, asking questions such as 'Do you think the content covered was important to students? Why?'; 'What moral or ethical concerns occurred as a result of the lesson?'; 'How does this fit within wider society?', et cetera.

Faith formation practices

The small suburban Dutch reformed congregation in Bloemfontein has one full-time and one part-time pastor. The congregation consisted of 426 adult members and 81 under-age members (Ned Geref Kerk 2019:194). It has 15 children in the preschool to Grade 3 children's church, 8 in Grades 4–6 faith formation group, 12 in Grades 7–10 faith formation and 2 in the confirmation class. Before lockdown regulations, each of these groups attended face-to-face meetings at church on a Sunday. The faith formation practices for each group during lockdown will first be described and these practices will then be reflected upon from a hermeneutic perspective.

During lockdown regulations, when meetings were prohibited, the following practices were followed: The sermon was sent to the whole congregation on a WhatsApp group and a picture or activity added for the preschool to Grade 3 children. A WhatsApp group was created for the Grades 4–6 children, and Zoom meetings were held with the teenagers. When lockdown regulations permitted social gatherings, the Grades 4–11 groups met again at church on a weekly basis.

Preschool to Grade 3

It was decided to send a picture/activity for this age group, because the parents can be more involved with this age group. The sermon is a family activity, and afterwards the parents can help the children with the activity. It is less intensive on the parents as it is linked to the theme of the sermon and does not ask preparation from the parents. It gives them the opportunity to interact with their children on the theme of the sermon. When church services could again be held, families attended the church service with their children.

Grades 4–6

One adult (male) is involved. This group makes use of a programme that helps children learn about the Old Testament. The lessons are in the form of imaginary 'video shoots' with the theme of a specific Biblical event (Schultz 2018).

The following themes were addressed: Bible as God's Word, Biblical narratives from creation to Moses, God's holiness, God's care, obedience and trust.

During those times that the group could not meet, the children made video clips or creative hand projects at home and their parents shared them on the WhatsApp group. This method of teaching was chosen, because it links with the theme of the book 'making films about the Bible'. It gives children the opportunity to be creative and involves their whole family. No special equipment was needed, as the short videos could be filmed on a cellular phone. Because of the challenges of 'homeschooling', the themes were spread over a longer interval to give children enough time to prepare their contribution. At first, the group was slightly reluctant to participate; eventually all members made some form of creative effort to portray a given Biblical theme. However, it became evident that the burden of homeschooling was taking its toll. The school expected the parents to continue with the school programme at home. This left not much energy for 'Sunday school homework'. When lockdown regulations permitted it, meetings were again held at the church. The method included interactive games to assign the Bible message to their own lives. Children also did activities in their workbooks.

Grades 7–11

This group discusses Biblical themes and current issues in a teenager's life (Van Niekerk & Avenant 2018). Three adults were involved, namely, the two pastors of the congregation (male and female) as well as an elder (female) for the youth. The themes included differences in the world, the Pentateuch, prayer, baptism, filled with the Holy Spirit, social justice, labelling, the Gospel according to Mark, living with hope, depressing feelings, creation and romantic relationships.

The following method was used when face-to-face meetings were not allowed. A Google form was designed to prepare the teenagers for Sunday's theme on the Zoom meeting. Some of the content of the 'lesson' was changed into monkey puzzle questions. One or two general questions on how the teenagers experienced their life in lockdown were also added. This form needed to be completed before the Zoom meeting. During the Zoom meeting, one of the adults took the lead in putting the theme on the table to be reflected on and discussed. Teenagers were asked beforehand to open or close in prayer, to read the applicable Scriptures or to prepare two or three questions on the theme to ask the three adults involved. During the Zoom meeting, responses were also asked for in the chat box function. The meetings took place every Sunday evening. Attendance was very good, with 90% attendance most of the time. The teenagers were given the opportunity to minister to an old-age home in the congregation during lockdown. Each of them collected a packet of seeds from one of the pastors and had to grow them until the seedling stage. These seedlings were then delivered to the sidewalk of the old-age home for their vegetable

garden. An event was also organised to have some fun as a group: Virtual Bingo. Lastly, it was decided to have a weekly 'Woema Woensdag'. Each Wednesday, the elder for the youth sent out an encouraging message on the WhatsApp group of the teenagers. When lockdown regulations permitted it, meetings were again held at the church.

It was decided to use this method of faith formation, because the teenagers are quite familiar with virtual platforms. Furthermore, they gained the opportunity to think about the theme beforehand via the Google form. They were engaged by participating in different elements of the meeting (opening or closing in prayer, Bible reading, reflecting on questions in the chat box, preparing interview questions for the adults, etc.). Other elements of ministry were also introduced on account of virtual workshops attended on youth ministry in pandemic times. This included having a 'fun' event – Virtual Bingo. The pastoral element of youth ministry was addressed with a weekly motivational post and having them reflect on their feelings in the Google forms. Ministry with the youth was accomplished by having them grow seedlings for the vegetable garden of the oldage home in the congregation.

Analysis of faith formation practices

Preschool to Grade 3

Hermeneutic reflection level 1 (technical): The method (picture and/or activity sent with the sermon on WhatsApp group) decided upon during lockdown was effective to help the children understand the sermon at their level as well as to involve the parents. As it was sometimes difficult to obtain a picture or activity to match the sermon, the faith formation practice was not always so effective. When church services were allowed again, the children could learn from the routine of going to church on a Sunday, doing specific things with their family and other people (read, listen, sing, pray). This was effective if parents did attend church with their children. The method of sending a picture/activity on the WhatsApp group was efficient, as it was one prepared activity per sermon that could easily be downloaded.

Hermeneutic reflection level 2 (practical): The goal of this form of faith formation was to involve the parents and make the theme of the sermon more practical for the younger children. The consequence of the method and content was that parents with younger children had to put in 'more effort' than people with older children.

Hermeneutic reflection level 3 (critical): The sermon was not specifically chosen to address themes that would necessarily be of interest to the children. Furthermore, the sermon themes did not build on a structured curriculum. However, that also meant that there was no opportunity to become bored, because themes were mostly similar. This method gave parents the opportunity to apply the content of the sermon in their own lives while doing the activity with their children. Another method that could also have been used would be to formulate age-appropriate questions that parents can discuss

with their children. The question could be asked whether all parents would be able to print out the pictures/activities and whether this method did not exclude some children.

Grades 4–6

Hermeneutic reflection level 1 (technical): Inviting the children to make videos and sometimes handcrafts about specific themes was effective in helping them summarise the main points of the specific Bible story. It was efficient, as it required technology and material they already had at home.

Hermeneutic reflection level 2 (practical): The goal of this method was to help the children summarise the main elements of the theme/Bible story and, in the process, learn the facts about the Bible story. Furthermore, the children can come under the impression of the reality of the Bible story as they act it out in real life. The consequence of this method was that the adult involved in the children's ministry had to apply new methods in the faith formation programme. Children had to think creatively about the illustration of the knowledge in a video clip or handcraft. They did not simply sit and listen to the Sunday school teacher telling the stories. A further consequence was that parents sometimes had to assist with finding material for the handcrafts, to film their child's video clip, and to upload it on the WhatsApp group. The parents also had to assist in some cases with the 'plot' of the video for the younger children.

Hermeneutic reflection level 3 (critical): At the age of these children (9–12 years), it is important to learn the most prominent Bible stories. They have a capacity to memorise verses and the books of the Bible. The broader context of homeschooling during this pandemic and lockdown was considered in giving the children extended time frames to work on their Sunday school projects and not simply on a Sunday. The impact of all the new responsibilities on parents to homeschool their children later became evident. This method was dependent on the assistance of the parents who already had many responsibilities on their plate. However, it was evident that the parents appreciated the congregation's effort to keep ministering to the children in these unusual times. The children also had the opportunity to see each other on the video clips; therefore, no longer experiencing feelings of isolation.

Grades 7–11

Hermeneutic reflection level 1 (technical): The method used (Zoom, Google-forms, etc.) was effective in structuring the week's schedule into a Sunday for the Zoom meeting and other days for other activities; creating a sense of koinonia in meeting on the virtual platform; reflecting on theological themes rather than COVID-19 statistics; having some fun together without leaving their home; and ministering to people in need (old-age home).

The method was efficient as it had to fit into the 30-minute free Zoom time and the most essential content had to be discussed during that time. The use of anonymous Google

forms was also very efficient, as it condensed the theme to a few questions that the teenagers could think about.

Hermeneutic reflection level 2 (practical): The following goals for the ministry to teenagers were set:

1. To complete their faith formation 'curriculum' for the year amidst the challenge of not being able to meet face to face.
2. To minister to the teenagers' needs (social contact, peer support, etc.) in these challenging times.
3. To help teenagers be aware of other people's needs (the old-age home) and do something concrete about that.

The consequences of the faith formation programme followed included:

1. Parents became aware of the congregation's sincerity to keep ministering to the teenagers.
2. The teenagers were forced to think about something else than COVID-19 and school work.
3. The adults involved in the youth ministry had to apply new methods in the faith formation programme.

Hermeneutic reflection level 3 (critical): The content used originated from the book *Ingenooi deur God* [Invited by God] written with teenagers in mind (Van Niekerk & Avenant 2018). The topics are, thus, very appropriate, although they do not address all the issues experienced during lockdown. These issues were discussed via questions on the Google forms (e.g. 'How do you feel about lockdown?', 'What do you miss in this time?', etc.) as well as during the 'meet-and-greet' at the start of each Zoom session. The Zoom meetings felt slightly unnatural at first, staring at a screen, almost like watching television. However, having a weekly routine of meeting one another, participating in the event by different people and living together through these strange times made the Zoom meeting a valuable event not to miss. Making use of a virtual platform had some extra cost implications for everyone involved. In a world where normal social contact was prohibited for a time, and very unnatural at other times (wearing a mask, sanitizing hands and keeping a social distance of 1.5 m), an attempt was made to restore something of the familiar (Sunday school/faith formation) with the weekly Zoom meetings. When lockdown regulations permitted it again, face-to-face meetings were held at church – a masked brigade, sitting at a safe distance, after being screened for entrance. It felt like a very 'un-Biblical way' to have communion. But still, it was good to be able to see one another – masked face-to-masked face, like the survivors of an apocalypse!

A way forward in challenging times

In challenging times, some aspects of ministry will remain the same and other aspects need to change. The Bible will always play a central role in terms of content and how people meet and treat each other. The content of faith formation will remain broadly the same. The importance of relationships remains. However, the methods used will

have to be revisited in the light of the special circumstances that can arise – for example lockdown during pandemics prohibiting social contact.

From the experience in this small congregation and other information found, the following can be suggested as a way forward in challenging times:

1. A weekly routine of regular meetings with our fellow believers is very important. It keeps us aware of the enduring role of God and fellow believers amidst a world where everything else can change instantly.
2. Get to know the most effective and efficient technology to use (efficient in terms of cost and user-friendliness).
3. It has its challenges to build new relationships on a virtual platform, so be sure to pay attention to relationships at times where physical meetings are possible. However, a virtual platform is still better than no contact at all.
4. These virtual meetings should not simply be more 'screen time' but meaningful time spent with fellow believers.
5. Be aware of the challenges of parents, children and the youth in terms of school and other responsibilities during lockdown.
6. Rather do less, but meaningful content, than overwhelming with yet more things to know or do.
7. The ecology of faith formation (relationships, structure and practices – Matthaei 2004) still forms the basis for faith formation although maybe in an adapted form.
8. Inform families about the faith formation programme to be followed and what participation is required.
9. Prepare for a blended approach – online and face to face – when circumstances change.
10. Address different needs through the faith formation programme: Biblical knowledge that can help to adapt in this strange world, relationships that are welcoming and accepting, support when you feel overwhelmed, fun just to enjoy yourself and relax amidst all the overwhelming alarm calls on social media and in the news.

Conclusion

The Bible, faith formation and a virus. The aim of this article was to analyse pastors' responses to faith formation in children and youth during pandemic times. The decisions made regarding faith formation were reflected upon. How did the pandemic influence the specific methods chosen for faith formation? From the discussions above, it is clear that lockdown regulations prohibiting physical meetings and then eventually allowing meetings under special conditions were the biggest driving forces for the choices made in the faith formation ministry. The knowledge and experience with technology of the adults involved shaped the mode of ministry. The content used was the normal content that would have been used that year at the church. These programmes were chosen beforehand because of their Biblical content and methods used in presenting the lesson. On account of knowledge gained through online workshops attended, other issues that could arise as a result of the pandemic were also addressed.

What made this different from 'ministry as usual'? Technology made the biggest difference in the ministry. The content would have been mainly similar whether there was a pandemic or not. Topics that did arise because of the pandemic were added by applying the existing content to questions arising because of the pandemic. Extra effort was made regarding the psychological well-being of the teenagers in the light of the workshops they attended and the articles read by the pastors.

What role did the Bible play in the methods and content used? The Bible played a central role in the content of faith formation. Instead of simply sending WhatsApp content for self-study, it was decided to have Zoom meetings to experience a sense of *koinonia* – the fellowship of believers – which is an important Biblical principle. People could easily become isolated during the strict lockdown phase and these Zoom meetings gave an opportunity to feel part of a group, talking and praying together during these challenging times.

It was insightful to reflect on faith formation practices chosen in the congregation. Although choices were made for specific reasons, it is important to reflect afterwards on those choices. In some cases, the choices worked very well (e.g. with the teenage group). In other cases, the choices did not always work out as planned (e.g. preschool to Grade 3). Congregations can utilise hermeneutic reflection on three levels asking the following three questions (as illustrated in this study): First level: Was it efficient and effective? Second level: What were the goals and consequences? Third level: How does it look in a wider context? Reflecting honestly on one's ministry can help shape the pastor and congregation to be all the more prepared for pandemics and a brave new world.

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