

## Discerning the essence and mission of the church in the midst of COVID-19

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### Abstract

This article reflects on how the COVID-19 pandemic gives the church an opportunity to reconsider what the centre of God's mission is for the congregation. It will engage on the implications of its reflections for public practical theology and congregational development. Spurred by an electronic opinion poll carried out by the author on six focus groups on WhatsApp platforms, averaging 200 participants each, during the lockdown days in Ghana, the question was put, "What one thing do you miss about church during the lock down period?" Majority of respondents mentioned communal fellowship (*Konoinia*) as the most missed aspect of congregational life. This article reflects on suggestions engendered by this observation and how it helps congregations to discern what makes them relevant to their members. Thus, helping congregations to envision the future, invoke dreams of a new creation where a return to normality will birth a world in which the church would take a new shape, presenting a fresh sense of missional community able to bring God to the people of our day.

### Keywords

*discernment; mission; church; Covid-19*

### Introduction

The current article is part of an ongoing study of the African Church under the leadership Prof Malan Nel at the University of Pretoria. The author reflects on an opinion poll he conducted during the lockdown days

among six Christian WhatsApp platforms with participants from Ghana, South Africa, the UK, and Nigeria. The WhatsApp groups were created purposefully as focal groups for the above-mentioned project. Participants agreed to be part of these platforms for learning and sharing their views as part of research on various aspects of church life. For that reason, no ethical clearance was needed. The poll suggests that most congregants place the enjoyment of music and human interaction above other motives of congregational gathering, hence creating the impression that the entertainment aspect of music, rather than it being a sacrifice to God, seems to play down the importance of the mission of God and it gives a wrong sense of gathering or a skewed theology of gathering. The author does, however, have no intention to underrate the importance of music as part of worship.

The problem this article seeks to discuss is: how can the church focus on its mission given the tension between the growing trend of longing for just the warmth of human fellowship as against the needed growth or spiritual depth and connectedness for building up (spiritual formation) that gatherings should engender? This is more so as the love of fun seems to have overshadowed church members' commitment to the church's calling to the mission of saving the lost and restoring God's creation.

The context of this article is West Africa; and although the author mostly resides in Ghana, his frequent stays for both research and ministry in South Africa, his years of pastoral service in the African churches in the UK, shape his insights into congregational life which are brought into this reflection. Although the survey described in this article, therefore, carries views from worshipers and Christian leaders from the locations and mainly, the project is a study of the African Church with a focus on Ghana.

The question asked was, "*What is that one thing which you miss during lockdown period when churches are not permitted to meet?*" Ninety percent said, "The fellowship of the saints." Ten percent said everything about the church. A further question asked, "*Which specific aspect of your local liturgical order have you missed during the lockdown period?*" Again, eighty percent said, "The music" and fifteen percent said, "the feeling of being among people in fellowship" and three percent said the general atmosphere in the chapel and two percent said the whole service.

This author finds (postscript), a similar survey done in the USA by the American research group Barna with a wider spread of questions and responses. The Barna research grouped responses into categories of social and non-social aspects that were missed, the data highlighted that nearly all respondents (90%) missed church for non-social reasons; which includes listening to a live sermon, reading and liturgies and taking communion / Eucharist. Still, a large portion (85%) also admits to missing the social aspects of gathering, including greeting others or passing the peace during service, corporate prayer and connecting with church leaders in person (Barna 2021:np).

The love of fanfare without a commitment to having a deeper relationship with others seems to be creeping into the church. To many, the congregational gatherings are for recreation rather than worship. That worldview is seen in many amusement parks. In San Francisco, Windwood (2014:53) visited a crowded recreational ground, where everyone came, here taking cognisance of individualistic Western culture, knowing that no one would need to care about each other's presence. However, she went out of her way to say hello to a group of African American youth, they were so touched and said, "Thanks for seeing us." That remark feeds the title of Windwood's book *Why it matters to say hello*. Humans by nature, and particularly Africans, love to live communally. Mbiti (1969:322–325) writing on African religiosity, notes the conscious estrangement of Africans from their traditional kinship which forms the core of African life, otherwise referred to in the South African concept *ubuntu*. Gatherings are for communal purposes rather than for individual ends. "Individualism is destroying the church rather than building it" (Kilama 2019:1). Therefore, shifting human interaction to the centre of all desires and motives for going to church does not come as a surprise at all. Although the respondents indicate fellowship and music as the most cherished aspect of church gatherings, an examination of their theology of gathering suggests they see the church as an entertainment gathering instead of a place for building up for the mission of God. In the African context, this basic longing seems to have overshadowed the purpose of the church over the years and the onset of COVID-19 puts almost all human institutions to the test regarding their relevance to the times in which they live.

The church faces this test at a higher level because its stock in trade is human fellowship. Martin Luther King Jr says. “We[church] have before us the glorious opportunity to inject a new dimension of love into the veins of our civilization” (King 1960:287).

We cannot deny that the COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect every facet of life. To the church leader, the pandemic makes it difficult to play their role of participating in worship. More so in a communal African society, where church buildings are the Christian alternative to the traditional shrines. Lartey (1998:24), notes that “traditional healing communities are places of learning, spiritual direction, apprenticeship, discipline and care. A shrine is a place where the distressed, the ill, the bewitched, the troubled and the bereaved converge” (Lartey 1998:24). To Jenkins (2019:14), *koinonia* is a willing and faithful devotion to share in the practice of doing life together. From a social capital lens, “Leaders in faith communities often attain people’s support by reacting to their needs or requirements and then offering the members an opportunity to participate in activities, make friends, become part of the community and help to establish *koinonia*” (Nel 2009:3). Could church leaders take their eyes off the *missio Dei* while responding to these needs? Could the enjoyment of music be the biggest need for congregational gatherings?

### **What defines a congregation? Is it the gathering or the mission to which it is called?**

Amid COVID-19, the Unstuck Group conducted a survey which reveals that despite the many online services occasioned by the pandemic, churches have been “slow to embrace digital ministry strategies beyond providing an online version of their worship services” (The Unstuck Group 2020:2). The reason for the slowness in that regard can be attributed to confusion as to what constitutes a real congregation. To both a church leader and congregant, the in-person gathering is the only real gathering of a local church. To this way of looking at church, this author takes exception; because being missional is being relevant to the context of ministry, and how we understand the mission and define church gatherings determine the use to which we put them.

## **Discerning mission amid COVID-19**

The word ‘discern’ here suggests how one can tell what is to be the right way in a situation. Kearney (2015:21), says that when people discern, “... they are attentive, tentative, in touch with things”. To discern how the current pandemic, COVID-19, impacts her mission because of reduced communal worship as one of the central activities of the church, we need to identify what should be the main thing to sustain us in times like this, when we do not meet in-person. Unfortunately, COVID-19 has amplified the church’s incapacity to interact with the changing spiritual landscape thus further exacerbating the perception that the church is irrelevant and fuels its inward focus (Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization 2004:19).

Drawing from Nell (2009:4) where he looked at the condition of the church in the Book of Acts at uncertain times, the church needed discernment to be able to “form the horizontal bonds of the community by attaining clarity about their identity as part of God’s chosen people.” “Discernment flows from spirituality and nurtures wisdom – it is about making wise choices” (Niemandt 2019:162). In a time of unplanned change occasioned by a pandemic, identifying what the centre of the church’s communal life is becomes important to help keep it alive to the mission. Kearney (2015:23), viewed the discernment process as “Reading between gaps. Discriminating and differentiating between selves and others – and others in ourselves.” Why people long for church gatherings can be discerned from their ultimate reasons for going. In a world where the love of fun or recreation replaces many serious considerations, it is worth seeking to know why we gather and our theology thereof.

## **Towards a theology of fellowship or gathering**

Just as Peter Kreeft, speaking to human affections through the lenses of St Augustine, says, “That in which a man rests as in his last end is master of his affections since he takes therefrom his entire rule of life” (Kreeft 2014:113). That rule of life as far as congregational gatherings is concerned can be called, “a theology of fellowship” and it tells why churches meet and why they are handicapped while their members are asked to stay at home.

Our trying to discern what missional goal keeps the church together in turbulent times takes us back to suggestions engendered by the observations from the WhatsApp opinion poll and how it helps leaders of congregations to discern what makes them relevant to their members. “The liturgy of worship flows into the liturgy of life when a missional community focuses on finding God in the neighbourhood and broader community” (Niemandt 2019:177). Since “a community is an example of a world constituted by meaning” (Komonchak 1972:197), Schoeman (2015:360), points to the importance of *koinonia* as a collective identity in which co-operation is expressed in diverse ways. Thus, helping congregations to envision the future, invoke dreams of a new creation where a return to normality will birth a world in which the church would take a new shape, presenting a fresh sense of missional community able to bring God to the people of our day. This is relevant as Komonchak (1972:197a) puts it,

Community is given form and reality through common understandings and common judgments, an agreement as to the meaning of the common experience. And community becomes effective through common commitments for the sake of common values. Communities, then, are not primarily to be defined spatially; they begin and end where a community of experience, understanding, judgment, and decision begins and ends”.

The suggestion that one ceases to experience church when there is no gathering for worship, seems another hermeneutic of communal gatherings or fellowship which refuses to recognise the nature of the present context of the church. To Moltmann & Kohl (1984:287), “Fellowship is the mutual communication of everything a person has and is.”

The church is not a building. It is the gathering of the saints for God’s mission, and that makes it a missional community which must be responsive in their interpretation of the times in which they live. Relevance to the times means being alive to the missional task of the time. Forgetting this results in what Hirsch (2006:43), observes that the neglect of the task of making disciples does not make congregations fruitful in mission, because they rather become ‘little more than a worship club for trendy people alienated from the broader expressions of church’. This is more so when

the absence of the opportunity to enjoy music worship communally as it has been before COVID-19 makes people feel there is no church.

Understandably, Elbert (2020:16) observes that the people who are yearning for in-person connection most during a time of crisis are those who did not use online gatherings before the crisis. But the imperative is for people to embrace new ways of being church in the face of COVID-19.

## **Why the need to congregate at all?**

The answer to the question of why congregate or meet at all lies in the image we carry of the local church or congregation. Lonergan (1972:361) describes the Christian Church as “The community that results from the outer communication of Christ’s message and the inner gift of God’s love.” Similarly, Nel (2015:100) points out that “the congregation exists to communicate and serve the gospel”. And he views corporate dynamic worship services as motivators towards purposeful revitalisation (Nel 2015:244). In this sense, corporate worship serves as a source of spiritual strength for participants.

Rhodes (2015:15) suggests that “The Christian life as described in Scripture is to be lived in the context of the family of God and not in isolation (Acts 2; Eph 3:14-15).” Mathis (2014:2) shares five benefits of corporate worship as,

- Awakening (clearing of our heads as we experience others).
- Assurance (we gain confidence as we get to know that we are not alone in facing all that the world throws at us).
- Advance (corporate worship builds us up in faith as we progress in sanctification).
- Accepting the leading of others (in corporate worship we learn to respond to the inspiration which others receive and share with us) finally.
- Accentuated joy (our joy doubles when we worship with others).

This view of corporate worship by Mathias extends the import of congregational gatherings beyond fun but it contributes to a holistic building up of people and congregations.

According to Webber (2001:31), “There is a recovered emphasis on the church as a nurturing and caring community”, thus the making of disciples become central to church life. When true fellowship goes on, “We encounter the Spirit of God dwelling among a people who are created and formed into a unique community” (Van Gelder 2002). Similarly, Niemandt (2019:161) sees the missional church idea as an answer to various contextual challenges and offers benefits including, “welcoming the stranger, and faithful presence in the midst of chaos.” A missional view of fellowship fosters a longing to fulfil the mission of God.

Halter (2011:xiv) in a forward to McNeal’s book, *Missional Communities*, said, “Missional community is exactly what would happen if we had to be real Christians.” In other words, Christians make a missional community and if a church is not missional then its members are hardly real Christians. Shenk & Stutzman (1988:20) observed that a Christian community happens only when people respond in faith to Jesus Christ. When churches make Christ’s disciples, they follow Christ wherever they find themselves. Revisiting the First-century Church, gatherings of adherents took place primarily in homes and some suitable public places, convening primarily for fellowship, teaching, and worship. However, the gatherings were not the point or focus of Jesus-follower spirituality. Christianity was primarily a practice, a way of life (McNeal 2011:28).

### **If Christianity is a way of life, can real *koinonia* (fellowship) be lost because of COVID-19?**

Has a new meaning of the word “church” developed, which clouds people’s imagination of what fellowship is about? “When the Church is considered only in theological terms, its relevance to the wider world of human experience is lost to view, and the privatizing tendencies of post-Enlightenment religion are encouraged” (Komonchak 1995:12). That brings to mind, what Haines (1961:65) said, “The great word ‘fellowship’ is used to describe so many forms of human association that its meaning has become degraded into mere gregariousness”, in which people show superficial happiness when they meet their fellow congregants but do not have any commitment to foster deep closeness with them as is expected in a congregational fellowship. The Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 13:11–14,

gave a parting admonition and benediction which is often affirmed with little or no reflection on its words, Particularly, the verse 14, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (ESV). This affirmation suggests an abiding presence that all disciples of Jesus Christ must endeavour to keep. “Just as the first-century church was often pushed into an ever-expanding circle of cultures and identities, we are often called into struggle, constantly challenged to move into new understandings of the Creator’s steadfast and unreserved love” (Community of Christ 2018:70).

Our seemingly loss of control over COVID-19 appears to have plunged even the church into a state of communal darkness. Church leaders have had to think of new ways in which they can restore the lost fellowship when the church is unable to meet. The use of electronic communities became an obvious option; WhatsApp, Zoom, Skype, Google Meet with their technological limitations came to the rescue. Although its potentials are vast, the Online Church comes with major challenges of mission: how to make a service in a different culture relevant to a multicultural world, presenting the Christian message clear enough in a Multi-faith context; and how to ensure best practices in missions and outreach (Reisacher 2018:2). After preaching online for a while, the author discovers that his audience became very diverse, and apart from those who have joined his congregation’s Facebook group, he cannot tell who watches from what those in the group share outside of it. The gospel travels farther on the internet than in-person services. That seems to be a new mission field to be explored by many congregations. Does the lack of a theology of authentic fellowship affect the required mission focus of congregations?

John Mbiti describes African religiosity because of its interaction with Western imperial missionary enterprise in Africa, as he observed that Western mission spiritual life did not drive home the good news because most Africans saw the European as a symbol of oppression and for that reason, did not foster authentic fellowship within their kind of church. Mbiti writes,

We have shown how religious Africans are and that in traditional life they do not know how to exist without religion. Mission Christianity has come to mean for many Africans simply a set of

rules to be observed, promises to be expected in the next world, rhythmless hymns to be sung, rituals to be followed and a few other outward things. It is a Christianity that is locked up six days a week, meeting only for two hours on Sundays and perhaps once during the week. It is a Christianity that is active in a church building. The rest of the week is empty (Mbiti 1969:323).

No doubt, many Christians felt unchristian when there was lockdown because their faith seems to be only practised in the chapel.

### **A Spiritual Leadership Capital (SLC)-rich leadership discerns new ways in chaotic times**

The aim of the article is to reinvigorate the conversation about the centrality of mission to communion or gathering as the nature of the church. This focus on the mission will also address the problem of wrong priorities which seem to turn the church into theatres or places of entertainment rather than places of communal worship and relationship building and the building up of people in faith towards fulfilling the mission of God – cultivating their Spiritual leadership capital. Spiritual leadership Capital (SLC) theory is an intrinsic but inevitable aspect of a leader's disposition shaped by their spirituality. It informs the character and personality that people bring to bear on their leadership and external activities. It happens in the cognitive, relational, emotional and action domains (Tettey 2018:107). It therefore seems, if people have been thoroughly built up in their authentic spirituality, the SLC which would have enhanced their resilience in lockdown would have enabled them to quickly adjust to new ways of keeping fellowship and doing mission. To some people COVID-19 enabled them to start life in new ways such as adjusting to working from home, holding important meetings electronically instead of risking travel and its associated costs. SLC-rich people are quick to recognise the opportunity in chaotic times. To this author, COVID-19 rather offers the church an opportunity to cherish the once taken-for-granted fellowship of God's people, as it also, enables us to ascertain whether we are really strong in faith or overly dependent on the mass socialising effects of congregational life.

The problem with the foregoing practice of socialising is that the post-missionary era Church seems to offer a relational circle wide but not very deep fellowship. In a commentary on Acts 2:42, Waters (2004:549), suggests that the word fellowship which means communion was practised by the early Apostles by gathering around the same purpose as they devoted themselves to their preparation for the preaching of the gospel. “Missional communities are not clergy dependent; they have a rhythm that is unique to them and express themselves in ways that reflect the life in their centre” (McNeal 2011:xx). To Bogle (2020:9), COVID-19 offers a “new opportunity to pioneer a radical approach to worship – one that will be more relevant to the present generations”. By this, he means the use of technology to gather communities of faith online. This is relevant as many congregations fail to have real intimacy even when in-person gatherings were possible.

The author, a Presbyterian pastor in a bid to improve pastoral care during the COVID-19 lockdown period, asked Presbyters of his parish to keep telephone contacts of at least 20 members under their care who should be called at least once a week by the said Presbyters. While reporting back to the church session (board of presbyters) on how they fared with the assigned members, it turned out that many of them were not even conversant with the people they had called and the congregants likewise had a hard time recollecting who was calling them. This is an indication that for several years of in-person services, relationships were not built when the church regularly met. If relationships are deeply maintained, lockdown will not prevent us from being in touch. This begs the need for a renewed understanding of our theology of gathering, which ideally, should be missional in focus.

That missional authenticity begs the need to tell what a real church is concerning Christ’s image. McNeal (2011) suggests that it was not always the case as seen for most of Christian history, that congregations have served as gathering places where geographically approximate adherents could practice their faith. “For most of its first three centuries, Christianity was mainly a street movement, a marketplace phenomenon that spread through slave populations and social guilds of free labourers” (McNeal 2011:28). “The Orthodox Church is, essentially, his community of disciples trying to grow into his image and likeness” (McGuckin 2008:ix). And this image is shaped as people converge to fellowship, reflect, and learn how

they can join themselves to Christ to become his image bearers. Moltmann & Kohl (1984:289), observe that “image-bearers fellowship is designed to correspond to the triune God and to be his image on earth. The true human fellowship will participate in the inner life of the triune God.” The seventeenth-century Pastor, Clarkson (1988[1676]:190) said,

The Lord engages himself to let forth as it were, a stream of his comfortable, quickening presence to every particular person that fears him, but when many of these particulars join together to worship God, then these several streams are united and meet in one.

Raines (1961:71) suggests that “the Apostles’ fellowship was a total sharing of life, later described in Acts as including economic sharing. It was a genuine family in Christ”. Raines has Acts 2:42 in mind, “All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord’s Supper), and to prayer” (NLT). To Raines (1961:66) “... *koinonia* is fellowship with the triune God”. However, it seems the church has gradually replaced fellowship as sharing in the life of Christ in the bond of the Holy Spirit with just gathering for fun-fare. As Mashau (2014:3) suggests that “personal upliftment” or “entertainment” it should be a place of transformative encounters, one would expect congregants who value the transformative effect of fellowship to cherish it beyond the fun they enjoy in the human interactions.

The question that arises therefore is: is COVID-19 helping us to redefine church, its nature, and its mission? Reflecting on the way congregations in Ghana under Covid restrictions can hold effective services within one hour, leaving some of the activities which hitherto were routinely done in the previous normal times, but are by necessity dropped from the liturgy, a senior Presbyter in the author’s congregation remarked; “COVID-19 has taught us how to eliminate the unnecessary and to concentrate on the expedient.” The missional task of nurturing and evangelising, which the church is called to, needed a new face in the light of the pandemic. This task of nurturing is a communal task as well as one requiring individual commitment – a process (Webber 2001:6). In the opinion poll referred to earlier, none of the respondents mentioned the loss of opportunity for growth. They rather lamented missing out on good music, human interaction and feeling the presence of others.

One would expect congregants to see their communal worship as part of their preparation and building up process for going to make disciples of others outside the chapel. The initial period of a person new to the faith community is to undergo catechesis (the process of teaching people the basic principles and practices of being Christ's disciples). "This process brought a person to Christ and into full communion with the Christian community through periods of development and growth culminating in baptism" (Webber 2001:6a). Thus, the goal of the worship experience is to build oneself and others up in the faith. Hebrews 10:24–25 points out the need to continually gather as a church to encourage one another. However, this aspect does not seem to be at the forefront of most Christian gatherings of our time. The fact is rituals are deeply ingrained and anything disruptive to our ritual is always unacceptable. Being church under lockdown because of COVID-19 is equally unacceptable but, the church is not a physical being to be locked out. "Our light is not primarily in the words we say. It is in the life we live (Stanley 1995:119).

### **The church "congregationalized"**

The idea of Christians gathering as the central practice of the faith gained ascendancy when the church settled down into a religion dominated by clergy. Church as congregation developed the expectation that people would demonstrate their devotion to the faith by participating in the congregational activity, which centrally involved the worship service. Rather than a lifestyle of the counter-cultural sacrificial love of neighbour, adherence to "the faith" became centred on assenting to a set of doctrinal beliefs (McNeal 2011:29).

Where the church seems to have failed is that its members have traded intimacy with God, neighbour, and self for a self-determined goal for going to church.

### **Have our gatherings turned into misguided rituals?**

Regarding first and second century Christian corporate worship, Lanthrop notes that as a Eucharistic community, the centre of worship is the body of Christ. He writes,

It is this word-table community, the body of Christ, which gathers other people to its number, continually teaching both itself and these newcomers the mercy and mystery of God and washing them in the name of that God. All of these essential things urge the community toward the world – toward prayer for the world, sharing with the hungry of the world, caring for the world, giving witness to the world (Lathrop 1994:22).

Thus, the mission of God calls the church to where God wants to communicate himself to the world. Could it be that God is calling the church to a mission in this time of fear, confusion, death, and isolation caused by COVID-19? When the church neglects to discern the purpose of its communality, the mission will surely be compromised. And if that happens, worship and gatherings are abused. In the days of Martin Luther, there arose abuses of the worship moments of the church and Luther, who seems to remain the court of appeal in matters of Protestant worship, prescribed that “When the lesson and sermon have lasted a half hour or longer the congregation should give thanks and pray with psalms, responsories, and antiphons, completing everything within an hour, or whatever time is desired, so that it is not tiring” (Herl 2004:4). Besides the length of services, people attended church for ulterior motives. As they often came late and the ones who did arrive early often came to socialize, as Tanya Kevorkian reports for eighteenth-century Leipzig: “People observed one another and greeted their neighbours as they arrived. From their balcony pews, men, including students (who had their balcony), could observe the women below. They also courted young unmarried women by visiting them at their pews” (Herl 2004:51).

### **How different is the African Christian of today from the German one of Luther’s day? A proposal for the discerning missional approach to church worship services**

To begin with, Merker (2020) asks us to consider how a robust view of the assembly protects us from some of the forces that tend to weaken our worship today. Namely,

- A strong theology of assembly combats *formalistic worship*. Since the gathering is a supernatural event in view of the watching cosmos

(Eph. 3:10), it doesn't make sense to simply "go through the motions" out of a sense of duty or tradition.

- A strong theology of assembly combats *individualistic worship*. The service is a gathering of those who have committed to help each other endure to the end. This keeps us focused on the good of others, and it prevents us from seeing the church as a "programme" that's offered merely for our inspiration.
- A strong theology of assembly combats *consumer-oriented worship*. What God's Spirit is doing in the whole church is more important than being comfortable or having my preferences met. Each believer experiences the joyful freedom of taking the focus off self and putting it on God and others.

Finally, to put it positively, a strong theology of the assembly reminds us that God delights to pour out his presence among his people.

The question arises: what is the most important thing about church gatherings? The author asserts that the answer lies not in what congregants clamour for but in the mission of the Church. The communal enjoyment of music and fun which was missed during the lockdowns occasioned by the COVID-19 Pandemic, seems to be a commodity which, they have little or no supply of because they are prevented from meeting, is wrongly perceived as the central object of their gatherings. This is more so thinkable given the consumerism which has characterised many an African congregation. Consumerism is that phenomenon of wanting personal satisfaction for every human transaction.

Through a homiletical lens "If preaching may be understood, it had a central place in the life of the church" (Broadus 1926:3). It is through the "preaching of the holy gospel" that the "Holy Spirit produces [faith] in our hearts" (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 65). In that sense, "Christ figures at the heart of worship as the mediator not only of God to man but of human praise and prayer to the only wise God: *solī Deo gloria*" (Wainwright 2006:33-34). According to Lanthrop (1994:22), the essentials of Christian worship are accentuated as a community gathers in prayer around the scriptures read and proclaimed. He calls it a community of the word and the Lord's table. To him, it is this word-table community, the body of Christ, which gathers other people to its number, continually teaching both itself

and these newcomers the mercy and mystery of God and washing them in the name of that God. All of these essential things urge the community toward the world – toward prayer for the world, sharing with the hungry of the world, caring for the world, giving witness to the world (Lanthrop 1994:22,23).

Pointing to the essence of Christianity in the Greco-Roman era, where church fathers such as Tertullian, Justin and Tatian prevailed in the defence of Christian traditions and mission, Bediako (1999:47), describes the Christian faith under the headship of Christ as “... the training ground of the human mind and personality”. That noted, it can be asserted that if the church returns to its missional purpose on earth, healing and restoring the world becomes the main goal of its gatherings. In Kraemer (1996)’s view, “One of the essential traits of the Gospel is that the Christian Church is the body that is characterized by the eager expectation of the Kingdom and the renewal of men and the world” (1966: 6). And as such the gathering of the church for worship is an effort at renewing congregants’ faith and making them effective for the restoration and renewal of the world even when they face the hard task of survival in an epidemic like COVID-19. Something went wrong long before COVID-19 appeared; the loss of meaningful community that characterised the church in the book of Acts. Now the larger the congregation, the less intimate fellowship there is.

According to Webber (2001:31) “There is a recovered emphasis on the church as a nurturing and caring community” as ideally in gathering “We encounter the Spirit of God dwelling among a people who are created and formed into a unique community” (Van Gelder 2002: ). In house churches, it was easy to share love; people got to build full relationships. But with the erection of public church buildings to accommodate more people, the atmosphere of community dissipated, the feeling of love diminished, and the church’s morality began to decline (Rappley 2011:51). That is how church gatherings became fanfare rather than a gathering for study, building up and reorientation towards the Mission of God.

## Conclusions

The purpose of the church is to fulfil the mission of God. When congregations meet, they aim to build up their members to fulfil God's mission on earth. One thing which seems to show itself about how churches have used their times of gathering in the pre-COVID era is that church gatherings have largely drifted towards satisfying individual longings which seem to have overshadowed the import of *koinonia*. The gathering of the church for worship is an effort at renewing congregants' faith and making them effective for the restoration and renewal of the world even when they face the hard task of survival in an epidemic like COVID-19.

Something went wrong long before COVID-19 appeared; the loss of meaningful community that characterised the church in the book of Acts. The missional focus of the church should use its gatherings to enable members to participate in the leadership and fabric of their neighbourhoods, expressing God's love through care, service, and witness in the bond of the Holy Spirit because they are developed to do so. The way forward is for the church and academy to focus on a recovered emphasis on the church as a nurturing and caring community that can live on in the lives of its members even if not able to gather.

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