

Churches online in times of corona (CONTOC) – an ecumenical and international study

Prof. Dr. Thomas Schlag

Faculty of Theology /Zentrum für Kirchenentwicklung (ZKE), University of Zurich

Project Website:

<https://www.contoc.org>

Presentation at the General Pastor's Convention of the Northeastern Evangelical Lutheran Church in South Africa (NELCSA)

– via Zoom August 18th 2020





Academic Background – Research and Personal Interest

Prof. for Practical Theology (Religious Education, Church Theory and Pastoral Theology)

Director of the University Priority Research Programme „Digital Religion(s). Communication, Interaction and Transformation in the Digital Society“ (2020-2032).

Research Interest: Public Church and Public Theology – Theological communication (like Youth theology), „Digital Theology“



**1st study trip to South Africa
August 2012**

Churches online in times of corona (CONTOC)



**2nd study trip to South Africa / Stellenbosch / Cape
Town Region in January 2019**



Background, Research Question, and Project Aim

Background: Impact of the corona crisis on church activities (worship services, pastoral care, diaconical work, education), on the pastoral role/self-image, on volunteer participation and creative, innovative digital format of communication.

Research Question: How have the churches during the COVID-19 crisis tried to remain present "communicating the gospel" and "keeping good relationship" within and beyond their congregation?

Project Aim: What can the churches and its personnel learn from these experiences for the future (hopefully) beyond the crisis?

Time frame: Survey of the experiences of pastors/ministers in the period mid-March (beginning of the lock down) and mid-May 2020,

Start of the survey: End of May; end of the survey: July 12th 2020.



Methods and Expected Results

Methods:

- Predominantly quantitative Online (Lime-)Survey: 42 items; also 4 opportunities for commenting on certain item answers and 3 open questions (qualitative part).

Participating churches:

- from 22 countries on 5 continents; (apart from Germany, Switzerland, Austria) mainly protestant.
- number of filled out questionnaires: around 6700 (from South Africa around 240)

The results shall:

- be incorporated into the university teaching of future theologians
- allow opportunities of training for church personnel.



Extracts of Questions (for quantitative research)

Overall, my amount of work during the COVID-19 pandemic period was lower compared to the usual working hours.

Do you see opportunities or rather challenges in online-based communication?

Did you offer digital forms of worship during the pandemic? If so, which ones?

- worship services focused on preaching
- devotion
- prayer service (regular morning prayer, vespers, etc.)
- special church services (e.g. with young people, seniors, etc.)
- Meditation
- Communion / Eucharist
- Agape meal / community meal / digital aperitif
- Bible Sharing or similar
- I have not developed any digital services in the area of worship form(s).
- Other:



Extracts of Questions (for quantitative research)

How had personal pastoral encounters taken place during COVID-19?

How do you personally rate digital pastoral care?

What forms of online outreach programmes were carried out in your parish/congregation during the pandemic?



Extracts of Questions (for quantitative research)

What online educational opportunities were offered in your parish/congregation during the pandemic?

How have the changing forms of pastoral care affected your role as a pastor?

- I could not fully live up to my role as a pastor.
- My task as a pastoral worker for others was taken up by their friends, acquaintances and family.
- I was not present enough in my role as a pastor. Habitual contacts could not be maintained.
- My role as a pastor has not changed. I was still in intensive contact with people.
- I was more often and more intensively pastoral than usual.



Extracts of Questions (for quantitative research)

Do you expect new experiences of living community from such digital Christian community forms? *

Please write a comment to your selection

Do you expect such digital Christian community forms to produce entirely new forms of theological productivity?

Please write a comment to your selection



Open Questions (for qualitative analysis and interpretation)

What is your greatest learning experience during the COVID-19 pandemic period?

- What becomes less important?
- Where do you think increased engagement makes sense?
- What else I wanted to say...



Intensive public debate on the role of the churches in the crisis

- Were the churches too passive in view of the decreed ban on assembly?
- Should they not have positioned themselves much more critically against the ban on visiting (in old people's homes, hospitals, prisons etc.)?
- Did they really contribute to a significant interpretation of the crisis in a theological sense?
- Are the churches and their personnel really "systemically relevant"?
- Are they the biggest losers of the crisis?
- *“The system of religion could prove to be the real loser of the Corona crisis, because religious interpretation patterns of general persuasiveness were missing. The belief in paradise and in eternal life has been replaced by the hope of earthly life as the last resort.” (Rudolf Stichweh, Sociologist)*



Intensive internal debate on the role of the churches in the crisis

- Have the churches and their pastoral personnel too lightly engaged with digital formats without theological clarification:
 - What constitutes community and relationship at its core?
 - Can digital formats represent or symbolize "spiritual presence"?
 - What is absolutely necessary for the common celebration of worship (e.g. at the Lord's Supper)?
 - Has the interactive participation culture of digital communication been fully exploited?
 - Has one theologian sufficiently clarified the goals of digital-media publicity?

“The God-crisis of the present is not only a crisis of faith but also a crisis of language. Theology and the church are thrown back to the beginnings of understanding what sin and redemption, grace, resurrection and new life in general mean.” (Ulrich Körtner)



First insights into the results for Switzerland, Germany and Austria

1. Many participants state that they feel encouraged to develop innovative formats!
2. Across all denominations, the digital media are seen as offering great opportunities and hardly any risks! There is therefore no evidence of resentment among the participants.
3. Digital forms of worship are understood across denominations as a worthwhile complement to, but not a substitute for, traditional worship services.
4. There is a great deal of uncertainty in assessing what significance digital forms of worship could have in the future. However, a change in one's own professional role is not expected.
5. Cooperation with volunteers has become particularly important during the Corona period. Ecumenical and interreligious cooperation was less important.



First insights into the results for Switzerland, Germany and Austria

6. The crisis has led to a strong internal orientation of the participants' community work.
7. the number of users of digital formats has expanded (up to an increase in the number of "visitors" to church services)
8. There is a clear expectation to receive more personnel and technical support in the future.
9. Many participants indicate that meetings and conferences are becoming less important and that this could also be a longer-term effect, while the genuinely pastoral tasks have become more important.



Further research – Which crisis have the churches dealt with in these times: its own crisis or the COVID-19-crisis?

- What types of crisis management can be identified? (also in a comparative sense due to contextual differences in the various countries)
- “What crisis?”
 - of the different practices of pastoral care and pastoral work?
 - of the church?
 - of the society?
- Do digital formats help to deal with the current situation in innovative ways?
- What is – in all communication and activities – the utopian potential of the “kingdom of God”?



**Thank you for your attention and
looking forward to sharing
thoughts!**