

COVID Questionnaire Initial Results and Responses

Dave Thurston

In late April of this year, the PCQ Committee on Ministry Resourcing sent Tim Dyer’s paper, *Increasing Resilience in Adversity (COVID-19 version, March 2020)* to all ministry workers of the denomination. A team of people followed this up with a phone call which asked our ministry workers to identify the two most significant issues impacting their ministry and leadership as a result of *COVID-19* from the list of 10 outlined in the paper. They were then asked to identify the two most significant strategies for building resilience from the 10 strategies suggested in the paper. These could be strategies they are already implementing and finding helpful, or strategies that they have found important to grow, because of the new situation they are finding themselves in.

Our aim was four-fold:

1. To reach out to those involved in the care of our congregations and encourage them
2. Use Tim’s paper to help them identify what has been going on in the crisis for themselves and those they care for
3. Help them identify how they might respond to the crisis at a personal and corporate level by adopting helpful resilience building strategies and
4. Gather information that would help us post specific material on the *CMR Healthy Church* website to help our ministry workers continue to be healthy and helpful in their important role

Our plan is for the team to continue to call our pastoral workers on a regular basis while the crisis lasts.

Of the 120 pastoral workers and specialised ministry workers contacted by the team, we gained feedback from 79. This is a summary of the results.

The Results:

These are the 10 issues that COVID-19 is creating for Christian ministry and leadership, identified by the paper:

1. The pastoral load is significantly increased because of the pandemic
2. Pastoral access however is severely restricted
3. The most vulnerable are the most challenging to connect with and to care for
4. Ministers potentially face more than the usual number of pastoral situations
5. There are increased family pressures in parishioners’ households
6. Pastoral ministry and team leadership is having to be re-invented
7. The technology required to connect people during this period is demanding
8. Financial pressure on churches
9. Dislocation from minister’s extended family and their support
10. Pastors have their own personal family life and health needs

A summary of the responses to the question of what two impacts to your ministry and leadership are you experiencing as a result of COVID 19, is as follows:

10 Issues	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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Number of responses	11	13	4	2	5	44	24	1	7	17
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The three most significant COVID 19 issues affecting the PCQ ministry workers are:

- 6. Pastoral ministry and team leadership is having to be re-invented - 44
- 7. The technology required to connect people during this period is demanding - 24
- 10. Pastors have their own personal family life and health needs - 17

There is little surprise that the impact of technology during this period scored so high, especially in the first few weeks of the crisis. Most participants expressed that the decisions that had to be made about what technology to use to deliver Sunday services and to keep small groups connected were exhausting, but then the equipment needed to be sometimes sourced, and mastered. Getting used to using the technology has changed the shape of the week, not to speak of the relational quality of the interactions the technology produces.

Nor is it especially surprising that the Pastor’s family scored relatively high for impacting ministry and leadership at this time. Many families have all family members living and working under the one roof; with many couples sharing the supervision of children learning from home.

The biggest issue by far however, with almost twice the responses of the next contender, is the necessity for the re-invention of pastoral ministry and team leadership during COVID 19. This has impacted churches of all sizes, as ‘ministry as usual’ is no longer an option. How to remain connected as a community of believers that can’t physically meet, is just one issue; caring for those in need, continuing to be a witness in the community outside the church and communicating well with other leaders are just some of the problems shared. A significant number of churches have taken the opportunity to try new ways of connecting other than reproducing the normal Sunday service online and sought to provide resources for their congregation in social isolation.

The following are 10 strategies for building resilience during times of adversity like COVID-19 as outlined in the paper:

- 1. Reminding ourselves of our call to ministry and leadership
- 2. Leaning into a deeper relationship with God
- 3. Developing disciplined mental focus and mindfulness
- 4. Working on emotional self-awareness and regulation
- 5. Cultivating a positive challenge orientation
- 6. Being clear on personal and ministry strengths, capacities and boundaries
- 7. Re-establishing structure, careful planning and implementation processes
- 8. Training in grit, determination and commitment
- 9. Keeping up with key supportive relationships
- 10. Gathering a range of external resources

A summary of the responses to the question of what two of these resilience strategies are being most helpful to you during COVID 19, is as follows:

Resilience Development Strategies	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Number of responses	18	28	19	16	17	4	24	1	14	4

Results regarding helpful strategies, as seen, are much closer with the top 4 strategies being:

2. Leaning into a deeper relationship with God - 28
7. Re-establishing structure, careful planning and implementation processes - 24
3. Developing disciplined mental focus and mindfulness - 19
1. Reminding ourselves of our call to ministry and leadership - 18

As the 'normal' was overturned during COVID 19, people in ministry roles firstly, affirmed the primary foundational of life and ministry, their relationship with God. Many shared that due to some significant changes in the pastoral routine, there was more space available to spend time with God. But even where ministry roles became busier, the need to trust God in the uncertainty, drove many to seek comfort and wisdom in him. This has affirmed what we already know to be true in ministry, that our healthy perseverance depends primarily on a real and growing relationship with Jesus.

It is also not surprising, due to the upset in the 'usual', that the re-establishing of structure and routine and the careful planning and implementation of processes, are the second highest rating strategy during this period. Although this has taken a number of weeks to work out, by the second month, most respondents seemed more settled with what they were doing. For many, the re-organisation of the ministry week has expressed itself in a 'new' day off.

Strategies 3 (Developing disciplined mental focus and mindfulness) and 1 (Reminding ourselves of our call to ministry and leadership), reflect the disruption to ministry that COVID 19 has brought and the need to resist long term distraction. With the absence of the normal affirmations associated with ministry, such as preaching and appreciative relationships, we are being reminded that ministry is primarily what God is doing in us, as we seek to work alongside God in what he is doing in others.

Initial Observations of the Effects of COVID-19 – Amplification, Acceleration and the legacy of Zoom

Covid 19 has impacted church and ministry life in two broad systemic ways; firstly, it has acted as an amplifier of problems and secondly, as an accelerator of independence.

Amplification:

Problems, challenges and unhealth have all been amplified over this period of time so that post Covid many churches will be confronted with immediate difficult choices that were potentially in the 'middle distance' before the crisis. For instance, a lack of leadership or initiative, the presence of anxiety, or failing attendance, may all well become patently evident and critical, when before such problems were only chronic. Some churches may not survive the relaunch and many ministries will struggle to restart meaning that our presbyteries will face significant challenges and decisions.

Acceleration

The acceleration of independence is the relational result of the health strategies designed to bring the spread of the virus under control: isolation, detachment and distancing. This

triumvirate has accelerated the independence of campuses, individual ministry workers and ministries within churches.

It may be that one of the consequences of Covid will be the destabilising of the pastoral relationship in some charges and a sense that it is time to seek ministry in a different church or even to seek a different calling all together. No doubt other churches will find the pastoral tie deepened and affirmed.

Zoom

The COVID crisis has introduced a new player in the life of ministry and church that will be here to stay-Zoom. Zoom has been utilised in church services, growth group, Presbytery, Session and Committee of Management meetings as well as mentoring. This instrument of the disembodied virtual meeting, is a poor second to the real face to face human meeting, but in the absence of 'reality' has proved helpful and beneficial. While some complain of the "Zombie Apocalypse", Zoom fatigue and the impact on our eyesight and minds of trying to manage Zoom meetings, it will remain as part of many churches' ministry strategies. Zoom has allowed some churches to connect with shut-ins, young families and the geographically isolated, alike, allowed local churches to link to near-by nursing homes and has even proved to be a means of introducing some de-churched and un-churched people to the Gospel.

Conclusion

Whether our churches are small or large, the 'road back', whatever that means, will be neither quick or without its challenges and there will be no "business as usual". The graduated return will enable church leadership to consider what ministries and practices they want to retain from before, and consider what new practices or experiences they have learned that they want to incorporate into the new normal. Whatever your situation, this is a God-given opportunity to reassess, weigh the options and opportunities, and make some courageous changes under God.

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