

INTO THE VIRTUAL

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“...we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye...” is how St. Paul imaginatively describes our spiritual future. They are words that also poignantly define our recent experience and present reality. Almost overnight, the church’s witness and worship has been turned upside down, through no choice of our own. And whether we like it or not, it is also being turned inside-out. The question is quite simply whether the church will be able to adapt, not just for its survival, but with a spiritual vision to thrive in this unexplored terrain.

The words of the English seer-poet William Blake speak to our current plight: “We are led to Believe a Lie / When we see not Thro’ the Eye.” Fresh spiritual sight is needed to navigate this newly assigned mission. We need the ability to see “Thro’ the Eye,” in other words, to see God’s perspective and vision. We must learn how to be led by God anew, as the Israelites of old had to learn in the wilderness.

While this journey presents its challenges, they are far outweighed by its opportunities. I am reminded of those two proverbial individuals in a small cell looking out the same little window. One sees bars and one sees stars. One sees bars, those metallic reminders of reality. One sees stars, beyond the obvious, envisaging a new future of what can be.

While many may wish to return to the way things were before this crisis, they would be living in the past. How we embrace the present determines whether the church continues its demise, albeit now more quickly than before, or if she enters into what can be an unanticipated naissance, arising out of these pandemical ashes.

Looking into the horizon, the church’s new world will require a creative embrace of technology and new media, not as substitutes, but as inspired and strategic vehicles of ministry and mission. While we are already awash with jeremiads by those within the church warning of the supposed inherent dangers of technology, it is already clear that the Church’s experiences in the “virtual world” have provided many parishes and ministries an opportunity to engage with a far greater number of people, providing a glimpse of the potential. For other churches, it has already shown itself to be transformational.

We are being presented with a “how,” not an “if,” as to the church’s engagement with this new medium. Long ago a wise old sage challenged me not to focus on the breadth of ministry, but to focus on the depth, and to let God take care the breadth. There is a sense that in the world of technology, if it is spiritual depth that is truly on offer, the breadth naturally flows from there, in this “like-+-share” social media world. Spiritual depth will determine the breadth.

The exciting opportunity before us in this new world of the “virtual,” is to discover most effectively how to facilitate through it a genuine encounter with the Sacred, the Transcendent, through an experience of the sacramental. In so doing, the “virtual” ceases to be virtual, and instead becomes a means for real spiritual transformation.

As we venture forth into this new space, it is critical that we ask again key questions that all too often have had assumed answers.

What is the Church? During the pandemic, from home, people have worshiped with others across the country, even around the world. The universal church has become very local. We are being forced to broaden our understanding of the church in terms of its “boundaries” – both geographical, and as to how we “do and be” the church. The pandemic has led us to think again about how one prays and

experiences God as everywhere, as opposed to primarily in a “sacred place” with others in corporate worship. We have become borderless in the fullest sense of the world. It has been like a mini-series of “Faith Unleashed.” Our concept of the church community is even being reassessed, as through these “virtual” experiences we have been reminded that is much more about people than place. In this new world, the church comes to the people, and it thereby changes so much of the “culture” associated with church. At the same time, we need to focus this new medium on enhancing genuine community, which is essential as followers of Christ, and is too often the church’s best-kept secret.

What new skills do clergy need? A quick surf through the proliferation of live-streaming or recorded worship services quickly separates those individuals and churches who have naturally been able to adapt and effectively facilitate for participants an encounter with the Sacred in the world of the virtual, from those who could not. What does this say for the future training of our clergy?

Are we effectively communicating our faith? Communicating in this new medium, toward spiritual ends, requires new formats and content, often unfamiliar to the church. The church will need “content creators,” who develop 21st century virtual experiences, that lead toward deeper spirituality, while simultaneously serving to grow the local church community.

How do we stay a sacramental Church? One of the greatest challenges that Episcopal and Anglican churches faced during the closure was related to the celebrating of Holy Communion, with the vast majority opting for Morning Prayer or some other service form. How does or doesn’t the church enable others to experience the sacramental in a virtual medium?

To many, this may seem a disorienting and disrupting time for the church. We are having to navigate unfamiliar terrain without a clear map. However, change is essential for the continuation of any entity, the church notwithstanding. The Biblical imagery of the church is a “community on the move.” As the German theologian, Jürgen Moltmann, so eloquently championed, change is the way God most often does God’s work. As we venture forth into another dimension, the Psalmist words best serve as our guide: “Blessed are those who have set their hearts on pilgrimage.”

Rev. Canon Paul-Gordon Chandler, an Appointed Mission Partner of The Episcopal Church, is an author, US Episcopal priest, peacebuilder and art curator who has lived and worked around the world in leadership roles with The Episcopal Church, faith-based publishing, the arts and with Christian relief and development agencies. He serves as the Rector of The Anglican Church in Qatar (The Church of the Epiphany & The Anglican Centre), He is also the Founding President of CARAVAN, an international peacebuilding non-profit that uses the arts to build sustainable peace around the world.

An authority on the Middle East and North Africa, and on relations between the Abrahamic faith traditions, he grew up in Senegal, West Africa, a Muslim-majority context. From 2003-2013 he served as the Rector of the historic St. John’s Episcopal Church in Cairo, Egypt, an international English-speaking church serving the diplomatic, NGO, academic and business communities. He is also a Canon of All Saints' Cathedral in Cairo, Egypt. The author of several books, his newest book is titled “*IN SEARCH OF A PROPHET: A Spiritual Journey with Kahlil Gibran*,” which focuses on the all-embracing spirituality of the early 20th century Lebanese born poet-artist and mystic, Kahlil Gibran, the author of *The Prophet*, presenting him a much-needed guide for our time. More information can be found on the author website: www.paulgordonchandler.com.