



Conference report from the online consultation

What can be learned from Corona?

Theological and ethical challenges for churches living with the COVID pandemic

17–19 March 2021

Content

A	Overview: Reflection on the first year of the pandemic	2
B	Evaluations of the working groups	3
1.	Working group on “Leiturgia”	3
2.	Working group on “Martyria”	5
3.	Working group on “Diakonia”	7
4.	Working group on “Koinonia”	9
C	Discussion of the theological keynote speech	10
D	Summary of topics for further consideration.....	12

A Overview: Reflection on the first year of the pandemic

More than 80 representatives of Protestant churches met online for a virtual conference 17–19 March 2021. Participants from more than 20 countries discussed how churches have experienced and responded to the corona pandemic so far.

The consultation organised by the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE), the European Region of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) and the Protestant Church in Switzerland (PCS) started off with speakers from Spain, Sweden, Hungary and Great Britain describing how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected their churches. Next, Professor Torsten Meireis from Berlin presented a brand new [Guide](#) produced by the CPCE's Advisory Board on Ethics detailing the ethical challenges posed by the pandemic in theological, social and healthcare terms and highlighting potential approaches that churches might adopt.

The participants then split into working groups to examine some of the churches' fields of action more closely – worship in practice, Christian witness in society, diaconal work, and practising communion and solidarity. Professor Ulrich Körtner from Vienna rounded off the event with his detailed outlook based on 2 Timothy 1:7 – “For God has not given us the spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of consideration.”

With the aid of a major digital drive, the churches have succeeded in finding creative and impressive solutions for worship in the face of the ban on social gatherings – whether majority or minority churches, both in town and country. They also ramped up their pastoral care and diaconal work to aid isolated and elderly people and their concerned family members. The restrictions imposed upon funerals and the ban on singing proved considerably more difficult to bear and were perceived by many as infringements of religious freedom and civil rights. Repercussions of the pandemic such as domestic violence, the risk of increasing educational inequalities and the globally widening gap in access to vaccines have been actively countered by churches. The participants criticised the frequently evident prioritisation of economic freedom over the individual right to health care and the widespread focus on physical rather than mental health during the crisis. This was cited as one of the lessons that the churches had learned and would be bearing in mind during the ongoing evaluation of this difficult period. They stated that the aim isn't to return to “former” normality, but to consider the lasting effects of the crisis. At the same time, a new equilibrium needs to be found and nurtured between social, ecological and economic sustainability and equity.

The question as to how far the churches consider themselves to be “systemically relevant”, or reclaim this role for themselves, was finely elaborated – with relevance to the system in a political sense not to be deemed an indicator of how far the churches fulfil the mission of God's Gospel. The churches are called upon to counter the apocalyptic visions of some predictions by exercising power, love and consideration to counter both panicked fear of the virus and the absolute belief in medical advances in a zero-risk society. The pandemic also asks questions about our image of God. The crisis should not be considered as a punishment from God, but certainly as a test of faith in the one Word of God “that we need to listen to, trust and obey, in life and in death” (Barmen Declaration, 1934). The spirit of power, love and consideration in no way means carelessness, emotional rapture or inertia, but – in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words – drawing upon the resurrection of Christ and the hope imparted by Easter to announce a new, cleansing wind blowing into our present-day world.

We plan to conduct a further, face-to-face conference in October in Rome (further details to follow in summer 2021). The conference papers are accessible [here](#).

B Evaluations of the working groups

The working groups were each allocated one of the four chapters in the CPCE's paper, discussing the questions also printed on the reverse. The way the paper and working groups were structured was considered to be very helpful.

In the following, references to "the church" or "the churches" refer to the contributions made by the conference participants and their realm of experience. The broader applicability of any of the statements beyond their specific context could be addressed in subsequent discussions or the follow-up conference.

1. Working group on "Leiturgia"

- **The digital shift was quick and huge, but people are very much looking forward to meeting (safely) again. Digital learning showed to be difficult for young people.**
 - The first services of worship, including the Lord's Supper, were broadcast as videos on YouTube or Facebook Live, which didn't convey the feeling of communion or authenticity of the blessing, for example. After that, they moved onto Zoom, which made it possible to see and experience all the participants. This was much better. (Switzerland)
 - The digital switch was huge, perhaps too big. (Poland)
 - People are warned against coming to church because of the risk of infection. The situation differs between town and country – people in towns would like face-to-face worship again, less so in rural areas. (Belgium)
 - Entire services of worship were filmed as videos and sent all over the world. People felt uplifted by this. (USA)
- **Practising the Lord's Supper was a big challenge, not only due to theological and legal restrictions, but also because every congregation developed its own solution. The ban on singing was another difficult issue.**
 - A theological debate broke out regarding the admissibility and validity of conducting the Lord's Supper online. Ultimately, this did not happen a lot, as lockdown didn't last that long. (Denmark)
 - Only one congregation physically celebrated the Lord's Supper. Some opened the churches after worship to allow people to take away their own individual (prepared and packed) Supper. (Latvia)
 - It was possible, after enquiring with parish leaders, to celebrate the Lord's Supper at home without a pastor. (Poland)
 - We are tasked with collating experiences and experiments with conducting the Lord's Supper online. It has clearly helped to forge contacts beyond parish and national boundaries. (Germany)
- **Some congregations refrained from gathering although it was allowed. Others felt embarrassed to be open while every other institution had to close. Cases of critics towards the churches were noted.**

- One problem arose and keeps on cropping up with certain churches recommending refraining from celebrating worship despite the government's permission. Self-limitation. (Germany)
- There was a lot of attention to and criticism of the churches remaining open while all other institutions were closed. Some attacks against THE church were made that warranted justification. (Poland)
- The portrayal of church hospitals in the paper (p.10) gives the impression that the churches were exemplary compared to state hospitals, or that the churches have/had an important status in the health system. The former is incorrect, and the latter applies to only very few churches in Europe. As a rule, the churches weren't involved in decision-making processes. (Belgium)
- **The need for pastoral care was extremely important, and was met mostly through electronic means (phone, internet...). The ban on visits, at home or in hospitals, was a challenge for many, as well as the celebration of funerals.**
 - Banning home visits was difficult for many people. (United Kingdom)
 - The entire work of pastors was then conducted solely by telephone or online. (Latvia)
 - There were positive experiences with telephone contact – allowing people to meet, if not physically. (Czech Republic)
 - Leading clerics offered spiritual resources on a daily or weekly basis to support people's spiritual lives.
- **It was possible to reach offline people with print-outs, phone calls and ordinary mail. This was successful even beyond the limits of the congregations.**
 - We returned to the practice of printing the sermon and sending out copies by post, or putting them in people's letterboxes. There was demand for this beyond congregations. Others sent them by email. (Latvia)
 - It wasn't possible to work together ecumenically with the Catholic or Anglican Church. Apart from that, many members had no Internet access. It was difficult to get/keep them involved. (United Kingdom)
 - Online options weren't pleasant or attractive for young people, though. (Czech Republic)
- **Despite all the difficulties, the response of the churches was greatly facilitated by the existence and widespread use of electronic tools. The pandemic would have caused much more damage twenty years ago.**
 - The project "Church online" was developed this way. (Poland)
 - It was actually an opportunity that this happened now in the electronic era, and not twenty years ago. (Denmark)
- **Will the people really come back to services? The fear is here to stay for a while. But also many people, especially in remote places or the physically weak, are very pleased with the new tools. This might also have significant financial consequences.**
 - As soon as vaccinations are available, there will be fewer problems. So far, only one congregation has recommenced physical services of worship. (USA)

Critical comments about the paper and further questions/topics.

- The discussions of the role and voice of churches in public debate needs further elaboration.

- Many churches were very involved in finding ways of maintaining “business as usual”; that’s not all that is worthy of recognition.
- The ecumenical context / collaboration during the crisis isn’t addressed.
- A pandemic naturally strikes the heart of all human activities based on physical presence/ interaction and proximity – singing, pastoral care, funerals, the Lord’s Supper, etc. It is to be expected that digital options will continue to be sought and used to a lesser degree. That then raises the question of electronic equipment for the churches, also training for pastors/those in charge, which might affect the Gustav-Adolf-Werk.
- The CPCE should consider at Council level whether the issue of the “validity” or “efficacy” of celebrating the Lord’s Supper virtually should be examined in greater theological depth, particularly with regard to the ecumenical dialogue projects being conducted with the Roman Catholic Church or within the CPCE with our own Lutheran churches.
- The digital gap between older and younger members is likely to close over time. The churches should consider the extent to which a hybrid range of options for worship might be sensible or necessary.
- The question of the churches’ educational work wasn’t directly assigned to the working group, but is closely related. In this respect, the church might be well advised to lean on the experiences gathered in schools and other academic settings.

2. Working group on “Martyria”

Main topics (expanded by members of the group)

1. Corona and the weak

- Refugees and migrants require special assistance, both with language and due to different cultural influences. Inter-faith dialogue is important! (Italy)
- School closures are particularly problematic for children in families that have experienced violence. (Lithuania)
- The situation of homeless people is not addressed adequately. (United Kingdom)
- First nations are particularly affected and need special support and care. (Canada)
- The “separated by corona” situation calls for new forms of communication. (Italy)
- The Russian-speaking community is particularly socially isolated. There is acute need to collaborate with the Orthodox Church. (Latvia)
- People at “crossroads in life” are also vulnerable – divorcees, those changing location/school/their job. (Germany)
- Ritual forms of spiritual life are extremely difficult to maintain living at home with a family. It’s easiest to manage for those living alone, but even there, rituals don’t wield the same strength of support. People need the backing of others, including to maintain structures. (Netherlands)
- The way elderly people are treated is a touchstone for being a church. (Canada)

2. Corona and education – upbringing – school

- Many teachers can’t reach their pupils, with some getting left behind who don’t have the technical resources for digital learning. (Belgium)
- “Tools” are required for theological exchange. (Lithuania)
- Churches are poorly prepared for the new digital challenges. (Germany)
- Digital formats unleash new prospects for learning together. (Canada)

3. Where does church “happen”?

- This question doesn't stem from the churches' inner circle, but from outside! For example, the media: “How can churches provide guidance?”, “Provide guidance!” (Belgium)
- But at the same time, we also have to say: This is already happening, but very frequently isn't heard!
- “Food first – then morality!” means in most people's eyes that material needs are more important than spiritual ones. However, this is a dangerous and certainly erroneous standpoint. As churches, we can and must make it clear that our truth is different: People need God's Word, spirituality and spiritual sustenance besides bread. We should bear public witness to this. (Germany)
- Pastors should be encouraged to contact their congregation by phone. Many are already doing this. They also bring food right to people's doorsteps. We are shocked and horrified at the silence that has arisen from losing loved ones and elderly people through isolation. (Italy)
- People are searching for understanding; for the right words and comfort. We can be “the one at their side”. (Canada)
- Churches must assume responsibility for countering populism and vilification. It's their responsibility to stand up for democracy. (United Kingdom)
- We need the right words to give witness! (Italy)
- When the churches speak with one voice, their voice is strong. So we need ecumenical platforms and discussion. (Estonia)
- In times of secularisation, we see that the “Christian voice” is no longer automatically relevant, but also that it is being abused by political systems. Hence it's important to agree our key concerns. (Hungary)
- In times of restrictions, it's important for churches to assume their own role. Other religions must also be in our focus at the same time. The question of “systemic relevance” must be described and discussed. (Germany)

4. What creative avenues do we see for churches in times of Covid?

- Focus on those who normally aren't the centre of attention (in Hungary: refugees/Roma ...) and “let them speak”. (Hungary)
- The churches can create spaces for reflection and shared learning to gain a better understanding of the challenges and burdens faced by others (marginalised). (Hungary)
- Churches can set the pace for discussions of human dignity, human rights, values and Good News. (Germany)
- Churches should have the attitude: Challenge us and talk to us about the Good News. (United Kingdom)
- It's absolutely essential to have chaplains in hospitals. That was already the case before corona, but is now all the more important – for patients and staff alike. Where this still isn't permitted, we should do everything we can to convince governments. (Estonia)
- Since the presence of the church in hospitals etc. became officially accepted, suicide rates – particularly among young people – have gone down. (Estonia)

Questions

The discussion revolved mainly around the following points:

1. “Task/responsibility of the church – internally”

- How can churches strengthen their structures to rally and help those in need?
- How can churches find ways to support and relieve the burden on pastors?
- How can we strengthen one another in our church, in our faith and in prayer?

2. “Task/responsibility of churches – as part of society”

- Churches are expected to give public witness, but this is not automatically desired. How can we achieve this?
- How can churches fulfil their task of setting ethical standards, advocating and incorporating them into social discussion (life and death/triage/human dignity ...)?

3. “Task/responsibility of the church in times of crisis”

- What does “systemic relevance” really mean? Where must churches distance themselves from “the system”? Where should we act as a critical watchdog and provide public witness?
- How can churches help in society to protect democratic structures and expose populism and conspiracy theories?

Quote from a participant:

“For God has not given us the spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of consideration.” Timothy 1:7, as heard and taken on board by a by-no-means religious author and attested to on Markus Lanz’s show – that made a profound impression on me. The unholy effect exerted by the spirit of fear has become more apparent to me with regard to the problem of corona, but also others, and the devotional on this subject felt very liberating. In the same essay: People cannot leave without trust. So true.”

Comments and further lines of thought

- For too long, churches were preoccupied with themselves and thus continuing “business as usual”.
- Access to and use of digital methods aren’t yet widespread enough.
- Churches were too hesitant in standing up for human dignity (the elderly and dying ...).
- They often stuck too closely to the system and confused this with systemic relevance.
- The pandemic has also intensified contact (via Zoom). This is a good thing! At the same time, we must test the boundaries of digital communication and the extent to which hybrid/personal contact is essential – and why!
- We are standing on the threshold of a new era. With more means of digital interaction, faster paths of contact, and new lines of collaboration (e.g. this conference), we should try to “speak with one voice”.
- The “post-pandemic situation” now presents new challenges.
- Do we need a post-pandemic theology?

3. Working group on “Diakonia”

Main topics (expanded by members of the group)

Public voice for Justice

Some participants – particularly from Great Britain – desperately missed the voice of the churches during the Covid-19 crisis in the public debate surrounding issues of ethics and justice. In Europe, it seems that church statements on issues of justice, which are simultaneously critical of the measures taken by the state or authorities, tend to stem from minority churches, who in any case have limited access to public media.

The question of churches' public advocacy for justice was described as a dilemma by participants from a number of countries, explicitly Hungary and Switzerland. They get criticised if they don't publically raise issues of justice, but just as much if they appear to be too opinionated.

Churches' strengths

Examples were cited in discussion of work performed by the churches that was considered irreplaceable, earning broad and very positive public regard for the role played by the church. People's insecurity in times of pandemic relates to both practical matters, such as the potential implementation of official measures, and existential meaning. Through its close contact with people, the church was also able to answer the sort of questions that governments didn't or couldn't address. This meant that, in places, churches managed to fill the spatial void for sharing experiences and discussion. Another strength of the church lies in providing pastoral care in the health sector, which has gained greater appreciation during the pandemic. It has reminded people that pastoral care in hospitals is also important for medical staff, as addressed in the CPCE's text.

How the church deals with insecurities

The pandemic has been surrounded by a great deal of misinformation, particularly in relation to medical (biological, epidemiological) expertise. Mistrust towards science is a breeding ground for conspiracy theories. Protestant churches in particular should be able to encourage people to think critically and responsibly. During discussions, the pastoral role of the church was also underlined – the role of listening to people, crying together and praying with them.

Criticism was voiced of the Estonian Lutheran Church from within its own ranks when apparently no few pastors spoke out against immunisation.

Barely or not discussed

Some topics in this field were only addressed on the sidelines during the conference and hardly discussed, as follows:

- There's no question that diakonia is required primarily for the most vulnerable and needy. The groups encompassed by this in modern-day societies could still be discussed more. Participants from various countries cited refugees, particularly those without papers and rejected asylum seekers.
- Europe should be more aware of its privileged position as a continent, compared to others, in terms of medical provision. Particularly in the debate over fair distribution of scarce vaccine supplies, many people disregard the poorer countries on other continents.
- The issue of "triage" is a paid a fair bit of attention in the CPCE's paper, although it was hardly addressed at the conference. I suspect that this stems from it being a very specific issue encountered primarily by medics and not so much by church workers. Hence it tends to be discussed in specialist circles rather than by the more general public. However, it should be in the interest of the churches for the voice of Christian ethics to be heard clearly in the associated debates. The thought expressed by a hospital chaplain seems important – that the pandemic has generated a new sensitivity towards ethical and also religious questions. She

suggested that the churches are called upon to capitalise on this attention and preserve it after the pandemic had passed.

- The sustainability aspects cited in Chapter 3.1 of the CPCE's paper were hardly discussed either, although nobody questions their importance. One reason why this topic isn't at the top of the agenda is probably that it has already been on the radar for a long time already and is therefore considered less specific to the pandemic. In effect, the pandemic has served to fan the flames of certain issues. Questions of sustainable business will likely become more acute in the future. The role of the church could be to remind people of sustainability and act accordingly itself.

Suggestions for further consideration

- The situation of migrants and refugees is a pan-European issue. These groups were all too often forgotten during the pandemic, despite facing particular suffering. It would be a good idea to focus more firmly on these groups in further work.
- The topic of triage would seem to be more suitable for attention by a smaller expert group.
- The pandemic has also raised ethical and religious questions in secular circles. How do the churches react to this? Have European societies really developed a new sensitivity towards these kinds of questions? What will become of this once the worst of the pandemic has passed?
- The question of fairness between the generations seems important and current to me, and it could be discussed under the heading of sustainability. As a rule, churches have a good long-term historical memory (e.g. recollections of the Spanish 'flu, the Plague, cholera). It would therefore be important to look further ahead into the future than just to the passing of the pandemic.
- "Flames fanned by the pandemic" could be used as title for a follow-on conference considering some of the problems in our societies – or civilisation as a whole – that have been magnified by the pandemic. What we have learned from corona would then not only be about us and the pandemic, but lessons that would help us to address challenges better that existed irrespectively.

4. Working group on "Koinonia"

Main topics (expanded by members of the group)

- **The pandemic is a challenge to diversity in society and church. Different views were no longer discussed, but broadcast (often aggressively).**
 - Aggressive language was also observed coming from pastors. The fact that they no longer stood in debate with others, but were able to broadcast their opinions to the public without being subject to direct criticism, had devastating effects. (Estonia)
 - You can say that the corona-deniers and anti-vaxxers in the churches lack solidarity and a sense of community.
 - A battle is being fought out on social networks between the scientific standpoint and fake news.
- **Some participants expressed their surprise at the extent of domestic violence and the effects of isolation upon the human mind (including the increase in suicide attempts), irrespective of social background. Churches can offer spaces to unwind when the domestic situation becomes boring and stressful.**
 - Domestic violence also included forms of vandalism and destructive rage within people's own four walls. The police were called on numerous occasions to people living alone who had trashed their apartment. (United Kingdom)

- Maybe the subject of domestic violence was highlighted too much. Against the background of the Hungarian Christian image of family, the positive side to family life should be emphasised, including peaceful surroundings and healthy living conditions. (Hungary)
- Bigger apartments with more breathing space can help reduce the potential for violence in families.
- **Need for social interaction esp. for those with mental health issues.**
 - People who had no opportunities to socialise with others outside their flats had no means of gaining a different perspective and so remained stuck with their own thoughts. This meant that people with mental health issues got no respite from their suffering. (United Kingdom)
 - Particularly when contacts are limited, it's important to see people you know again with whom you can share your feelings. (Netherlands)
 - Suicide rates increased during the pandemic. (Latvia)
- **Ecumenical relations were helpful in cases where churches shared solidarity and experiences; they were difficult where churches in the same area interpreted regulations differently. This disconcerted church members.**
 - Joint cross-border, ecumenical services of worship conducted online gave people strength. (United Kingdom)
 - If one confession continued to worship and celebrate the Lord's Supper in person, while another suspended church services, this baffled congregations.
- **We observe competition and solidarity between states and churches.**
 - The competition between countries over effective responses to the pandemic led to good progress in places. But now a battle over vaccine supplies is breaking out.
 - Some churches competing to see who can stay open longer is counterproductive.
- **How does the surge in digitalisation that we have experienced change our society in the long run? We yearn for physical contact and closeness.**
 - The profile of volunteers in the churches has been changed by the pandemic, with the older ones having to stay at home and self-isolate. The time came for the young computer boffins, who otherwise hadn't really found a place in the church.

Topics for further consideration

- One aspect of domestic violence that isn't addressed in the paper is how the elderly are being treated who are cared for by their families. There is no record of the violence that they have been subjected to by carers within the family, as it went unwitnessed.
- The paper can emphasise even more how churches foster community.
- The working group didn't discuss the process of European integration and Europeanisation. Perhaps these issues are still too far removed from people's everyday lives right now. But churches should raise and maintain awareness of this topic.
- The question of the profile of volunteers and the interplay between different generations in the church will become particularly important as a result of the pandemic and digitalisation.

C Discussion of the theological keynote speech

The presentation by Professor Ulrich Körtner examined two major subject areas that will continue to concern us theologically and pressurise us to seek theological answers in response to the pandemic.

1. On the one hand, how we can theologically juxtapose **God's action throughout history, the valuation of nature and the natural, and God's creation** in a responsible manner.

2. On the other, how our **perception of time and space has changed and how this affects our vision of human beings and God.**

1. The first question addresses, above all, whether the pandemic is to be described as a punishment from God. In previous centuries, when deadly epidemics were pretty much part and parcel of everyday life, this is how they were generally interpreted, as a means of understanding the mortal danger to oneself and other people. When a number of high-profile preachers started declaring the corona crisis to be a punishment from God early on in the media, the majority of traditional western churches deemed this an inappropriate interpretation. However, the reasoning that ensued was often at least as questionable – explaining that because the virus had natural causes and could be explained medically and scientifically, God played no role in its creation and spread. The ultimate conclusion of this line of argument is that God neither has anything to do with nature nor acts in this world. This renders all our talk of God’s Creation merely unctuous and empty rhetoric. Does the theology of Creation then become only a political line of argument to substantiate our own interests? After all, the churches base their ecological efforts to preserve nature precisely on caring for God’s Creation. But if nature is now perceived as cruel and destructive, then it should no longer have anything to do with God?

It is dangerous theologically to view nature as a separate reality from God and His Creation. We quickly find ourselves on the path to gnostic dualism, with nature existing independently from God and inherently evil from the start. To speak responsibly as Christians about God, we must ask how we can recognise that God created the world well and yet there are scourges such as pain, suffering and death, disease, war and epidemics. Perhaps the churches have preached so much about God’s love that in practice we have hardly touched anymore upon the dark sides of God that we don’t understand. We don’t have to view the pandemic as a punishment from God, but if God acts in His Creation and throughout history, we must at least face the question as to how God is challenging us in this pandemic and what this means for our image of God.

2. Second set of questions: Even though Jesus preached that the kingly rule of God had already dawned and was amongst us, Christianity nonetheless quickly redeveloped a strong focus on the afterlife. If the afterlife was initially still within reach in anticipation of the imminent arrival of Christ (Parousia) and with direct consequences for all aspects of life, it was postponed further and further into the distant future. In contrast, life on Earth was perceived as a vale of tears. It was only after the Enlightenment that Christianity experienced a swing towards worldliness, emphasising that there is also a life before death. Eternal life increasingly lost its momentum as the driving force behind everyday life. Nowadays, we are living entirely in this previous world.

However, the pandemic led us to start developing a consolatory strategy: “Once the pandemic is over, then ...”. The desire to return to normality is so strong that we have pretty much developed secularised earthly hope in the “other side”. The longing for familiar living conditions is so strong that we refer in everyday comments to “after the corona crisis”. Yet this consolatory focus on the future is a fallacious hope. Some will not live to experience the return of normality, and we don’t know when the next pandemic will hit, or if we’re not even on the threshold of an era of pandemics. The recent epidemics with pandemic potential were all zoonotic, in other words stemmed from diseases transferring from animals to human beings. If humanity continues to deplete the habitats of wild animals and exploit tightly crammed animals, it will only be a matter of time until the next virus jumps across to human beings.

Hope vested in this earthly side is deceptive and unreliable when it comes to existential issues. Christian eschatology, the hope and expectation of God’s completion of His Creation and the dawn of reality determined entirely by Him, unleashes power precisely by revealing in the here and now that God accompanies us on our journey towards our destination. No matter how much we long for a “new” normality, as Christians we should not fall for speaking of this “light at the end of the tunnel”

in preaching the Gospel, but far rather get inspired by and explore the other, all-determining reality of God as the “light at the end of the tunnel”.

D Summary of topics for further consideration

Practical issues

- **Digitalisation:** What formats are suitable for which kinds of communication? What technical solutions exist? There is need for training opportunities in digital communication and designing formats of worship. What other areas of life can the church learn from in this regard (e.g. digital teaching in schools and universities)?

Pastoral-theological issues:

- How must **services of worship** change in the wake of the pandemic? Will sermons become shorter? Will more space be created for interaction and shared experiences? Will hybrid worship become the rule?
- What effects is the pandemic having on the **profile of volunteers** in the churches?

Theological issues

- **The Lord’s Supper online:** We can expect more intense theological and ecumenical scrutiny of this subject.
- How can we theologically juxtapose **God’s action throughout history, the valuation of nature and the natural, and God’s creation** in a responsible manner?
- How has our **perception of time and space changed, and how does this affect our vision of human beings and God?**

Social and ethical questions:

- **Options for the weakest:** How can we ensure that, in times of crisis, churches focus not only on themselves, but also keep the weakest members of society in mind and act upon their behalf? This includes the churches directing awareness towards the weakest outside Europe.
- **Repercussions of the crisis on particular groups** (e.g. refugees, the homeless and mentally unwell, but also domestic violence against people in need of care) need examining more closely.
- **Platform for social discourse:** In times of crisis, how can churches offer encouragement and comfort and provide space for public discussion of controversial issues? Churches mustn’t present a monoculture, but promote diversity.
- **Sustainability – how the pandemic fans the flames of social developments:** The pandemic has shown which issues are insufficiently resolved in our societies, by exacerbating the associated problems. In future, there needs to be more discussion concerning issues of sustainability, and we must work towards ensuring sustainable social standards with regard to business, human rights, and social and generational justice.