

Nell, Ian (ed.) 2021. *Covid-19 in Congregations and Communities: An Exploration of the Influence of the Coronavirus Pandemic on Congregational and Community Life*. Johannesburg: Naledi. ISBN: 978-1-928530-72-5

Covid-19 in Congregations and Communities explores the influence of the coronavirus pandemic on congregational and community life from a predominantly South African perspective, with the inclusion of one chapter on Covid-19's influence in Ghana. The chapter authors hail from the Department of Practical Theology and Missiology at Stellenbosch University, South Africa, and offer “a theological response to the collective trauma we experienced as a result of the pandemic” (p. 1). Chapters include a variety of topics, namely, “spirituality, liturgy, homiletics, pastoral care, community development, ecclesiology, child ministry, interreligious dialogue, ritual studies, and missional theology” (p. 1). Methodologies include literature engagement, participant observation, interviews, Grounded Theory, and more. Each author offers original research focusing on the first lockdown in South Africa.

Themes that emerge acted as a magnifying glass and accelerator, that forced a reconsideration of worship and connection, highlighted the value of networks, and the importance of spirituality. Covid-19 magnified the inequalities of space, finances, gender-based violence, and healthcare, and in some cases “speeding up tendencies that were already detectable” (p. 260). It forced the closure of churches and thereby a shift to church online, once again magnifying the inequality of internet connectivity, data availability, and technological equipment and savvy. It also raised ecclesiological questions concerning worship location (onsite and online), connection to God and one another, liturgy, rituals, and more. It forced a shift from individualism to utilising social networks, including a need for better partnerships between the church and faith-based organisations. Finally, it forced a revisiting of the presence of God in times of crisis, focusing on both his authority and encouragement via his presence.

The monograph is easy to read and provides critical engagement concerning the various research topics. Of particular interest to this reviewer was the consideration of silence and anger in chapter 3. Silent Saturday, with reference to the Easter weekend, “stands between the experienced reality of disruption as represented by the cross, and the proclaimed reality of hope as represented by the empty grave” (pp. 59–60) and “may be helpful in preaching during times of trauma” (p. 67). It is a liminal space wherein there is room for an “honest expression of anger as a faith practice” (p. 70) knowing that God’s kingdom is not yet fully realised by evidence of lingering injustices. The authors provide a rich description via robust research of sermon content during the first lockdown in South Africa which is very engaging.

The book could have benefitted from another round of editing. However, this was insufficient to detract from the research and critical engagement of the various authors which was a delight to read. Hopefully, future prints and updated versions will be corrected.

The book is aimed at a specific audience, namely “specialists in the field of practical theology” (p. 9) and succeeds in offering diverse perspectives concerning Covid-19’s impact on congregations and communities. It is thus recommended to this specific audience as a dialogue partner concerning the pandemic and its influence in these specific areas.

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