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# We're all in the same boat

Stories of adaption and resilience from Australia's  
religious communities in the time of COVID-19

by Trish Prentice





## The author

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Six months ago, no one had heard of the coronavirus. Now, several months into the pandemic, much of our daily lives have been transformed by its spread. As health authorities move closer to finding a vaccine, societies and governments are taking stock of the economic and social impacts of the measures introduced to protect public health.

In Australia, religious communities were one part of society expressly impacted by the ‘lockdown’ directives introduced to stem the spread of the virus. On 29 March all places of religious worship were effectively closed by the restrictions that limited non-essential indoor gatherings to two people. Stories are now beginning to emerge about what it was like for these communities to lose their places of worship – for many, the centre of their social and spiritual lives. This essay describes the ramifications of the closure for some of Australia’s religious communities and considers what might be the long-term impact of the lockdown and our new social reality on the way these communities contribute to social cohesion in Australia.

## What is social cohesion?

Social cohesion is the “glue that holds society together.”<sup>i</sup> It is made up of all the different interactions between members of society and the attitudes and norms that contribute to building “trust, a sense of belonging and the willingness to participate and help.”<sup>ii</sup> Social cohesion is a uniting force,<sup>iii</sup> built from the relationships within social groups and between them. Religious communities are an important part of Australia’s social landscape. How do they contribute to social cohesion?

Generally speaking, religious communities in Australia have a long history of public service and philanthropy.<sup>iv</sup> They promote community building and social integration and foster values that benefit society.<sup>v</sup> They address peoples’ spiritual needs and help individuals to make sense of life’s events.<sup>vi</sup> Their narratives address fear and uncertainty and offer people a sense of security.<sup>vii</sup> Participation in religious services is known to have a positive impact on peoples’ wellbeing in various ways.<sup>viii</sup>

All of these contributions can be summed up in the idea of ‘social capital.’<sup>ix</sup> Just as “physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to the properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections among individuals...”<sup>x</sup> Religious communities create social capital through their activities.<sup>xi</sup> There are two forms of social capital.

The connections and relationships built within a religious community are referred to as bonding capital: “the social capital that exists within the congregation as opposed to its connections to the wider community or society.”<sup>xii</sup> Bonding capital is created through participation in the religious community, informal friendships and community projects.<sup>xiii</sup> It is generated through formal volunteering or shared activities, like going to a service, participating in prayers or singing.<sup>xiv</sup> Formal rituals such as the Catholic Mass, the



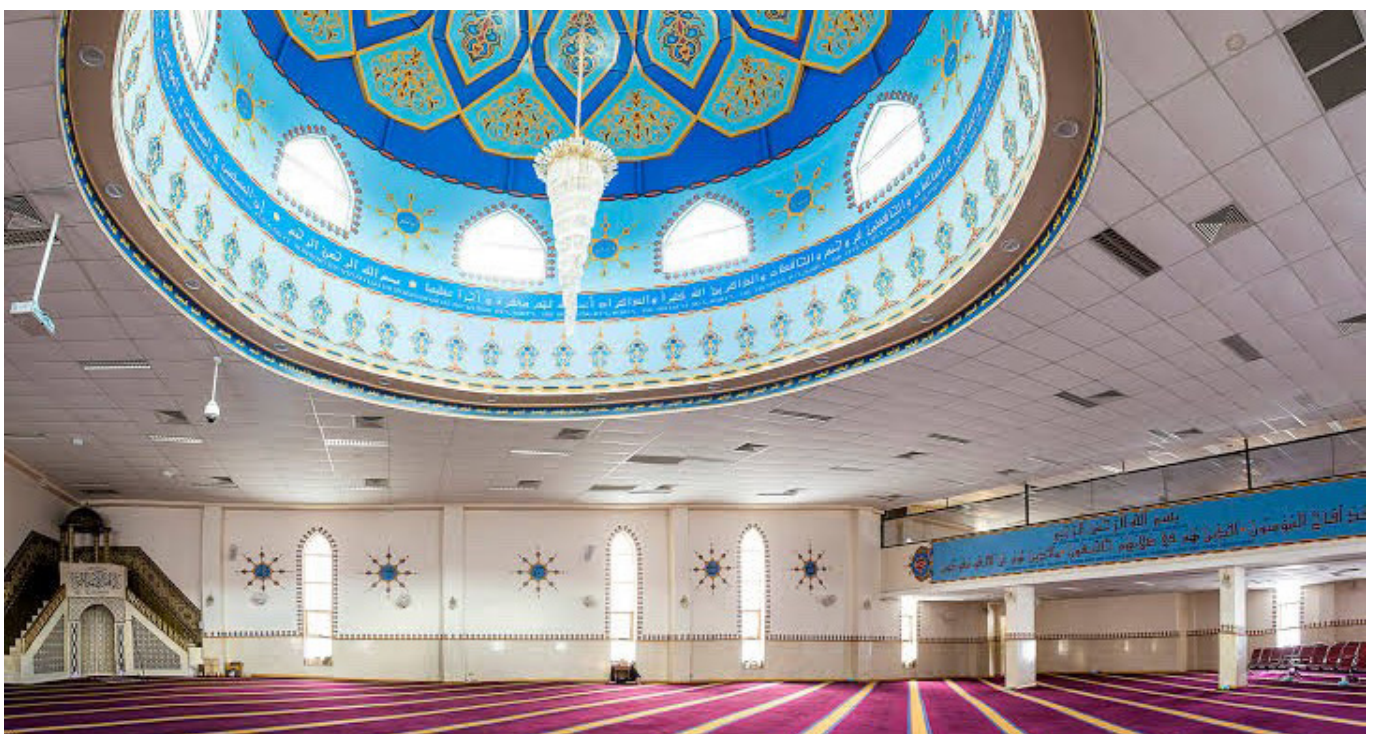
five daily prayers of Islam or saying a mantra in congregation are all types of bonding capital because they ‘bond’ people together in that community.

Bridging capital, on the other hand, is the connections and relationships that build links between the religious community and broader society. In Australia, Christian churches have a long history of helping others in need, especially those who are socio-economically disadvantaged.<sup>xv</sup> However bridging capital is not just limited to Christian communities. All major religious traditions encourage care for those in the community, helping the poor, generosity, charity or hospitality towards ‘strangers.’ The bridging capital of Australia’s religious communities was very clearly demonstrated during the recent bushfire crisis. News agencies reported Buddhist monks providing massages to emergency service workers,<sup>xvi</sup> Muslims hosting barbeques for bushfire victims<sup>xvii</sup> and Sikhs donating water, groceries, toiletries and tools for farmers affected by the fires.<sup>xviii</sup> These high-profile examples of bridging capital are not the only examples of Australia’s religious communities looking outwards beyond their own communities. Studies suggest that religious individuals (across traditions) are more likely to help others.<sup>xix</sup>

Both bonding and bridging capital are important for social cohesion because they contribute to the public good<sup>xx</sup> and to Australia’s social and economic wellbeing.<sup>xxi</sup> Religious communities are “a powerful and enduring source of social capital.”<sup>xxii</sup>

## COVID-19, restrictions on public gatherings and social distancing

In March 2020, the Australian Government began to introduce progressive measures to protect Australians from the spread of COVID-19 that prevented religious communities from carrying out their usual community activities. Church services and other indoor religious gatherings were deemed ‘non-essential’ and their participants restricted as part of measures to stop community transmission of the virus and ‘flatten the curve.’ On 14 March, non-essential indoor gatherings were restricted to 500 people as a precautionary measure. Non-essential indoor gatherings were further restricted on 18 March to 100 people (including staff members),<sup>xxiii</sup> although smaller religious gatherings, such as study groups or home churches were still allowed to meet as long as ‘social distancing’ was observed.<sup>xxiv</sup> On 29 March, in the midst of a wide range of closures of indoor premises and restrictions on freedom of movement,



all non-essential indoor gatherings in a public place were limited to two people,<sup>xxv</sup> effectively closing Australia's places of worship. Although this restriction was relaxed slightly on 3 April to accommodate the personnel needed to run Easter services, places of worship have been effectively closed to worshippers since the end of March 2020.

Religious communities have had to quickly adapt. For some religious traditions this meant grappling with how to negotiate the religious laws that require meeting in congregation or in a place of worship, or having a religious leader present to fulfill their religious obligations. For some traditions, new religious rulings were quickly issued.

## Formal responses

On 18 March the Fatwa Council of the Australian National Imams Council, a body broadly representing Australian Muslim clerics and scholars, and the Mufti of Australia, issued a religious edict (*fatwa*) allowing Muslims exemptions from the compulsory Friday congregational prayers:

*The Shariah permits for a Muslim, in the event of a pandemic that threatens one's life, such as COVID-19, which is spread through close social interaction, to not have to attend the daily congregational prayers and Friday Prayer (Jumu'ah)... We strongly urge Muslims to pray their 5 daily prayers at home and 4 Rak'at of Dhuhr instead of the Friday prayer. This is to avoid any places of crowded people.*<sup>xxvi</sup>

A number of Catholic bishops/dioceses also issued directives allowing religious exemptions from Mass, Confession and the sacraments. For example,

*Catholics from the Diocese of Parramatta are from 20 March 2020 dispensed from their Sunday Mass obligation until further notice (Canon 1248 §2 and Catechism 2181.)*<sup>xxvii</sup>

*The Sacrament of Confession will be suspended during this time of pandemic. Physical and moral impossibility excuses a person from confession, in which case reconciliation may be attained by other means, for example an act of perfect contrition. (Canon 960)*<sup>xxviii</sup>

*The faithful can keep holy their Sunday by setting aside some time for prayer at home, reading the Scriptures of the day, watching Mass on television or online, and asking God for the graces they would normally receive in Holy Communion (canon 87 §1, canon 1248 §2).*<sup>xxix</sup>

*Holy Communion is not to be given to anyone, including the sick, except as Viaticum for the dying.*<sup>xxx</sup>

The Rabbinical Council of Australia and New Zealand (RCANZ) also released a statement which affirmed that congregational gatherings for the Jewish community could be suspended and other forms of spiritual study used instead:

*Jewish law states unequivocally that life threatening situations and even suspected life threatening situations override all other considerations and given the rapid rate at which COVID-19 is spreading throughout the community, regular gatherings at shule [the house of worship] presents an unacceptable risk... We encourage an increase in the number of shiurim [class or lecture on the Torah] and Torah study online.*<sup>xxxi</sup>

## Community reactions

For others, COVID-19 raised theological questions about what should take precedence—religious law/tradition or government orders. Was this a matter of faith, where God required believers to continue to practice despite the threat of a fine or a matter of public safety where they should take every possible step to protect themselves and their community from the threat of the virus? In the early stages of the government restrictions, Rev. Margaret Court's Victory Life Church in Perth was widely reported as having responded less than adequately to the restrictions, announcing that all services would continue:

*"We are in agreement that this Covid-19 (sic) will not come near our dwelling or our church family... We are praying daily for you, knowing that we are all protected by the Blood of Jesus."*<sup>xxxii</sup>

Likewise, a spokesperson for the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia affirmed that holy



communion would go ahead, despite the risk of transmission from saliva on the shared spoon used to give wine to the congregation:

*“...once we decide to go to church, we believe there is absolutely no possibility of contracting disease from the holy cup... We believe that no disease or illness can exist in holy communion, which we believe is the body and blood of Christ”<sup>xxxiii</sup>*

Frustration and concern emerged in online forums as believers spoke out against the restrictions that prevented them from meeting:

*Are we to let the state or the federal government dictate our faith, who do we ultimately answer to the government or God Almighty himself [sic]. We are*

*commanded not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together as is the manner of some. But encourage one another as we see the DAY approaching. Therefore we must put our faith first, and any government regulation second. It’s a matter putting in God regardless of the circumstances. Not to do so, is to say that we trust the government more than God.”<sup>xxxiv</sup>*

However, on the whole, religious communities were quick to accept and abide by the government restrictions. The following case studies provide some insight into how different religious communities around Australia have coped with the COVID-19 restrictions, how religious law or traditions have been renegotiated or adapted and how they have sought to maintain congregational and community connections despite the restrictions.<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Disclaimer: These case studies are not intended to represent the experiences of all religious communities around Australia, nor of every congregation or community within the religious traditions represented. There are major religious communities not represented in the case studies. The case studies are intended to reflect the experiences of these communities from the perspectives of those interviewed.

## Case Studies

### 1. Glen Osmond Gurdwara, Adelaide South Australia

The Glen Osmond Gurdwara is one of several Sikh houses of worship in Adelaide, South Australia. Formerly established in 1988, it is also home to the Sikh Society of South Australia Inc, a body representing South Australian Sikhs, with approximately 240 members. Most of those who use the Gurdwara are ethnically Punjabi. Some are members of the Society, while others draw from the community, including local residents, migrant workers and international students. The Gurdwara is available for all and is open each day to be used for prayer or other religious or social purposes. A priest is usually onsite who can answer questions about the religion or provide guidance or spiritual support.

The Gurdwara holds several worship services each week, on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday evenings and Sunday mornings. A usual service goes for approximately two hours, where people listen to the teachings of the religion, pray together and hear the singing of traditional mantras (*kirtan*). On special occasions the Gurdwara can host up to 4,000 congregants. The most popular service— Sunday mornings—sees around 500 people meeting regularly. On Sunday morning The Punjabi School Adelaide also meets during the service. The students study Punjabi and the teachings of Sikhism while their parents attend the regular service. After each service the community gathers to share a meal that is cooked onsite in the communal kitchen from donated

food. It is a chance to socialise and eat together, as well as a way to provide for others in need in the community, who are welcome to join in. Although the Gurdwara does not count numbers, a “portion of overall” are international students.

After the restrictions on public gatherings were introduced, the Gurdwara has moved to streaming some of its services online, although a shortened (45 minute) version of the full service. Amardeep Singh, one of the Gurdwara committee members and Chairperson of the Punjabi School, noted that setting up online services was challenging because of the need for specialised equipment and skills to produce livestreaming. Streaming has now enabled it to reach a larger and broader audience, with individuals from India even sitting in. As “Sikhs believe that God is everywhere”, it hasn’t caused any spiritual difficulties for the congregation to worship and pray from home.

One of the positive things to come from the restrictions is the new way to engage with technology, says Amardeep, “we can see the advantage of using livestreaming to engage a broader audience and it is something the Society will continue in the future if it can source funding for it.” The Gurdwara is mindful there may be elderly or vulnerable members of the community who do not choose to come back to the public services once restrictions are lifted and the use of technology for broadcasting and communication will allow them to benefit from a sense of communal gathering, even if they can’t physically meet together anymore.

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As well as the regular services, the Punjabi Sunday school has continued to operate remotely, livestreaming and producing tutorials for the students and other online resources. The teachers, who work as volunteers, have been producing this content, and again they have seen the benefits of being forced to engage with technology in new ways. However, one of the challenges that has arisen for the school has been acceptance of this mode of learning in some families. Others now have work commitments on Sundays, which means their children cannot attend online on Sunday mornings, although they can still use the tutorials and resources.

One of the regular activities really missed by the Gurdwara members, says Amardeep, is sharing a meal together after the service. For some congregants this was a crucial part of their week, and they looked forward to the free warm meal and

community support. To try and address some of this need, the Gurdwara has developed a food distribution program that has distributed approximately 600 kilograms of flour and other food stuffs like rice since restrictions have been in place, but it hasn't met people's social needs in the same way the community meal did. Another challenge for the Society has been the loss of revenue. While it has set up provisions for direct deposit, most people tend to donate money (and food) in person. With the restrictions and social distancing measures in place, its revenue has decreased significantly. Still, the Society is striving to meet its members' and the community's needs as it can. "One of the things that has helped is the realisation that this is not just something being experienced by their community", says Amardeep. Other Gurdwaras in Australia, even worldwide, are in the same situation. Everyone "is in the same boat."





## 2. St Andrew's Uniting Church, Gardiner, Melbourne

The church of St Andrew's, Gardiner, is one of several Indonesian churches and congregations in Melbourne. The church has approximately 250 members, most of whom are Indonesian. A few elderly members remain from the original St Andrew's church congregation, which was formerly disbanded in 2016. The church congregation is a mix of families, children, teenagers and elderly members. Most are permanent residents of Australia, although a few international students also attend, around 20 or so. While the church had more international students in the past, many have joined the larger CBD-based Indonesian congregations.

On a usual week the church hosts various activities. There are two services on a Sunday (in English and Indonesian concurrently), as well as Sunday school for the children and teenagers. Fellowship groups run for young adults and international students during the week and there are 'life groups' for families and bible studies for the senior members. The church is staffed by a full-time pastor and part-time youth worker and supported by a casual administrator and caretaker. Many church members also volunteer their time to support community outreach programs during the week, supporting vulnerable members of the broader local community.

Since the COVID-19 restrictions were introduced, many of these activities have had to be cancelled or postponed. The church offers a pre-recorded service each week (alternate weeks English/Indonesian with alternate subtitles), as well as Zoom fellowship and bible study meetings. The pastor also records regular messages for the congregation to provide spiritual support to the community. People are making an effort to continue to connect online and via social

media. For Teddy, one of the church members, the lockdown has moved his family to start their own devotional studies at home as a family.

There have been many new challenges for the church brought on by the restrictions. Church revenue initially dropped by 80 percent after the regular services stopped. Some elderly members were not very technologically savvy so the church needed to organise instruction on how to install and use Zoom and support for those who were having difficulties. Social media, while providing an easy way to maintain connection, has also added to the fear and misinformation surrounding the virus. Many members of the community are finding the uncertainty of the situation difficult because they cannot make plans for the foreseeable future to travel or see family members. Many people are lonely and some have faced job losses.

However, the church also sees the lockdown as an opportunity to reach out and show love to the broader community. They have started a grocery program, offering grocery delivery for those who are housebound or find it difficult to do by themselves, and they are providing hampers of essential items to those who need them. So far 50 hampers have been distributed, funded entirely by congregational donations. The church is also looking at offering a parenting program via Zoom to support families in the congregation and to reach the wider community.

One unexpected outcome is St Andrew's has found that Indonesians overseas are tuning into their services online, as far away as Qatar and even in Indonesia itself. Many smaller Indonesian churches around the world do not even have a pastor, let alone the capacity to provide online content. These churches are benefiting from the work of St Andrew's.

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### 3. Lakemba Mosque, Sydney, NSW

Lakemba Mosque, NSW, is Australia's largest mosque. Established in the 1970s by a dedicated group of Lebanese migrants, it is now the spiritual home to Muslims from more than 120 different ethnicities. Its prayer services attract 2-3,000 worshippers each day but on special occasions, like during Ramadan, that number can swell to around 10,000 participants, flowing out from the mosque into its outdoor areas and carpark. Services are held in both Arabic and English. Most people who attend are Australian and bilingual, a mix of families, children and young people, as well as a large group of the original Lebanese congregants.

On a regular week the mosque, and the Lebanese Muslim Association which is based there, run a wide array of programs and services to meet the needs of its congregation and the wider community, from religious services, youth outreach, education and employment pathways; family, community, migrant and refugee support and health and fitness programs; to a food bank, legal clinic and health services. The programs and services are dedicated to drawing on community strengths and encouraging social and civic participation for migrant and newly arrived communities. Some of those who participate in these programs and services are regular attendees

of the mosque, while others practice their faith at other mosques, at home or do not have a regular devotional life. Lakemba Mosque is also regularly used for funerals in the community, which sometimes see up to 1,000 people come to pay their respects and pray for the deceased.

In mid-March, as the spread of COVID-19 came to public awareness in NSW, Lakemba Mosque decided to close its doors and began the massive task of moving its religious services and lessons online. It also had to work through the challenge of how to meet religious obligations like congregational prayer that were required in the mosque.

For the LMA, which had already begun to explore digital content and online programs, the lockdown provided the impetus to really explore how spiritual support and community engagement could be offered remotely. The LMA Engage, Challenge, Grow and Thrive Programs now offer an array of digital programs online, with a feature series each day (either livestreamed or as a podcast). For instance, Mindful Monday focuses on ways to cope during the lockdown, to manage the challenges of working from home and the presence of children and introduces mindfulness strategies to promote calm and stress relief. Toddler Tuesdays provides activities for children that the whole family can





engage in and She Talks Wednesdays features women discussing community issues and topics from different perspectives. The Program Director, Sahar Dandan, said “we’ve spent the last ten years building our community development programs and social services and COVID-19 presented us with the challenge to adapt and innovate our programs to exist in the digital space.”

During Ramadan, the Call to Prayer (Athan) for the five daily prayers is being broadcast from Facebook daily, as are sermons and messages from the mosque’s imams. Ahmad Malas, one of the mosque’s directors, confirms producing the online content has been a “huge undertaking”, resourced by staff and members working voluntarily. While the programs are “not yet at the quality... [they] hope to produce”, they are being well engaged with. Analytics show that while only around 100 people are watching the live content, approximately 50,000 people are viewing some of the online programs. Many of these are overseas viewers because at this time “nothing like this exists”, says Ahmad, for Muslim communities.

While the mosque has been successful in keeping its congregation engaged and connected online, the community is still feeling the impact of the lockdown. The mosque revolves around the pillars of “community, family and worship,” all three of which have been affected by the restrictions. The loss of close interaction is felt acutely by its members, particularly during Ramadan, when the daily fast is usually broken with a time of eating together with extended family and friends and congregational prayers in the mosque.

Some of our congregants are struggling with the inability to meet together and not being able to perform the congregational prayers, and the mosque

faced strong criticism from some members of its community in the first week it closed its doors in advance of the government directive. The change of habits has been hard for many. Still, the community is aware that all Muslims are sharing this experience, even friends and family members overseas.

Funerals, which used to be important community gatherings at the mosque, are governed by the new regulations, which has required the development of new policies and procedures. Now, instead of the community gathering to support the family of the deceased and to pay their respects and offer prayers, the mosque has created private Facebook groups where people can offer messages of condolence and support for the family.

Another impact on the mosque has been the loss of revenue. While electronic transfer is available for donations, many members of the mosque community tend to give on Fridays when they come to the mosque for prayer. The LMA has also had to reduce its operations significantly.

Looking to the future, the LMA will harness the success of its digital programs and endeavour to make online content “routine in everything... [they] do now.”

While the mosque has had to adapt many of its community and religious activities to the new situation, people are overcoming barriers and taking the opportunity to appreciate the things they previously took for granted. The restrictions preventing public gatherings have also provided families with new opportunities to deepen relationships at home and to develop new family routines in implementing spiritual practices. Even the imams are getting more “tech savvy.”

Looking to the future, the LMA will harness the success of its digital programs and endeavour to make online content “routine in everything... [they] do now.”



#### 4. Yeshiva community of St Kilda, Melbourne

The Jewish community of Australia contains several sub-branches, made up of groups with different levels of religious observance and practice. Melbourne's Yeshiva community is one of these, based around a large community centre in St Kilda. The Centre includes four synagogues, a school and an adult seminary for religious studies. Each synagogue has its own congregation, attracting particular members of the community, for example young adults, professionals or families. Community members tend to regularly attend one of the four synagogues, although visits between them are common. All up, the synagogues combined see 700 to 1000 regular worshippers.

The Yeshiva community of St Kilda is an orthodox branch of the Jewish community. Life revolves strictly around the traditions, rituals and laws its members share and practice. The synagogues (*shul*) are at the heart of this—its gathering places and the centres of its community and rituals. They are the place where religious services are held, prayers are offered and teachings are imparted. It is the place where community members see each other regularly during the day.

The COVID-19 situation affected the St Kilda Yeshiva community directly. In early March, before the government closure of places of worship, several

cases of infection were reported, connected to the Beth Rivkah Colleges associated with the Yeshiva Centre. The Rabbinic leadership took proactive steps to ensure the protection of its community from further spread, issuing five Halachic rulings in 10 days that limited attendance at prayer services (*Minyanim*), restricted *Shabbos* meals (Sabbath gatherings) to only members of a single household, postponed all community gatherings and celebrations unless outdoors and closed the ritual bathing pool (*Mikvah*). The rulings stressed that the “absolute prohibition of putting oneself in danger, or endangering others, cannot be overemphasised.” On 20 March, nine days before the government closure of houses of worship, the leadership issued a legal edict that effectively closed the synagogues and prohibited community activity outside the confines of members of the household.

For a community where much of its daily life and routine revolves around the synagogue, their closures had a tremendous impact. Adult men, for example, are expected to pray in congregation at least three times each day (morning, afternoon and evening). The *Shabbat* (also known as the Sabbath) begins each Friday after sunset and involves a service on Friday evening and four to six prayer services of varying sizes on Saturday. On Saturday morning the main service of the week is held, where the traditional scrolls of the Torah are taken out and read and the congregation participates in the breaking of bread together. Afterwards, members of the community



## Families are reflecting on what is important to them, on what traditions and rituals will be maintained.

share lunch together (the Shabbos meal). All of these elements of daily life and community have been put on hold for St Kilda's Yeshiva community.

Unlike for other religious communities, technology has not provided a solution for meeting the community's religious and social needs. Use of technology is already explicitly banned for some areas of religious practice. On Shabbat, the traditional day of rest, congregants are not allowed to do anything that is considered work, including driving a car, using money or using a computer or a phone. For the Yeshiva, livestreaming is outside what is religiously permissible for the community. Zoom cannot replace sitting down together with family and guests to share the traditional Saturday meal.

The *Minyan* public prayers, which involve a quorum of 10 adult men physically present at the synagogue to occur, have not been held since 20 March. Likewise, the traditional Torah scrolls have not been opened nor read for several months now. These ritual practices have entirely vanished from the lives and practices of the Yeshiva community.

Restrictions on the use of technology also apply to the Passover, the eight-day Jewish holiday that commemorates the Jewish people's freedom from slavery in Egypt and is celebrated with gatherings, festive meals and services at the synagogues. The highlight of the holiday is the *Seder* on the first and second nights, a long gathering of family and friends where around the table the Passover story is read while family and guests eat together. Of course, none of the public and community gatherings that usually take place during the Passover could take place this year, as the celebration fell during the first weeks of the lockdown. The community was permitted to use Zoom on the eve of the Passover, but once the holiday begun it was forbidden to use or livestream video.

There is a realisation, at the level of the Yeshiva's Rabbinic leadership, that the lockdown has impacted

the community in an unprecedented way and perhaps for the first time "leniencies" have been introduced to lessen usual religious requirements. For example, during the Passover families need to clean their house in a way that removes any trace of *Chametz*, any food product made from wheat, barley, rye, oats or spelt that has come in to contact with work and has risen. This is usually a massive task, says one of the community members, especially for families with young children, to clean "every corner, toy and even wipe over books that may have been touched with hands that have some Chametz residue." This year families were encouraged not to expend any more effort or stress beyond that which is strictly required. Instead, families were encouraged to focus on creating a "positive home environment" above any Passover requirements and to celebrate the holiday "in a joyous manner." After all, the leaders said, "[y]ou are only human. The bible was not given to angels and G-D does not expect us to do more than we are capable of."

The impact of this loss of tradition, ritual and routine on the community is perhaps more hidden than in other communities who have embraced technology as a substitute for their regular meetings or community gatherings. The familiar routine of walking to the synagogue on Shabbat as a family, greeting other members of the community on the way in this shared experience has been lost for the time being. The day, usually punctuated by congregational prayer times, is different now. One of the members of the community reflects that his prayer times are usually "a lot quicker" now. There is no impetus or accountability in the confines of your own home to pray in the way you would usually do. For some people in the community this has provided "relief" and the "freedom" to build new routines. Families are reflecting on what is important to them, on what traditions and rituals will be maintained. For now, it simply means "dressing up for Sabbath meals" or "having an extra treat" to show the kids that Saturdays are different and special.

## 5. St Joseph's Catholic Church, Hobart

St Joseph's Catholic Church in Hobart is the oldest Catholic church in the city. Today, its congregation is overseen by The Passionists, a religious order of the Roman Catholic Church.

St Joseph's has a congregation of approximately 250. It hosts Mass twice daily on weekdays, once on Saturdays and three times on Sunday, as well as Reconciliation (the Sacrament of Penance or Confession) each day after lunch. Congregational members also catch up regularly over coffee. As well as its religious services, St Joseph's provides hospital chaplaincy services in Hobart, visits to retirement homes, support to refugees and works with the Society of St Vincent de Paul. Most of its congregational members are over 60 years of age, generally from Malaysian, Indian, Sri Lankan, European and Australian backgrounds. As well as its regular congregants, the church also hosts visitors to Hobart, including holiday makers, tour groups and cruise ships. The church's services are advertised on board the cruise ships and St Joseph's often sees 20-30 visitors from each docking.

As the government imposed various restrictions on public gatherings, Fr. Addicoat, the church's pastor, describes the congregation trying quickly to come to terms with each set of restrictions and what it meant

for their usual activities. In those early days it seemed as if everything they sought to put into place was "useless" as restrictions became tighter and tighter. Once religious gatherings were banned entirely, all of the church's usual activities ceased. The church needed to quickly make a list of its parishioners from existing church rosters so they had a list of congregational members and then devise new strategies to keep "being church."

One of the challenges the church initially experienced was how to host a funeral with the limitation of only 10 people in attendance. An elderly member of the church passed away and the family requested a church funeral. They quickly realised that 10 people included the funeral director, the pastor and another attendant to carry the coffin, which left only seven family members who could attend. Restrictions on interstate travel further impacted who could attend from the family. Fr. Addicoat remembers looking out at the empty church with only three members of the family sitting in the front row. For him, this is when the impact of the lockdown became incredibly tangible.

St Joseph's has not been able to livestream because it lacks the equipment and expertise to do so, but it has encouraged congregants to watch other livestreamed services. A weekly newsletter is





produced to keep communication going and this is published on the church website and posted to around 45 church members who have no internet access. The community also keeps in contact via the phone and has started a Zoom coffee group. This has been a really positive activity, a chance to speak and to listen to each other. It has many advantages over their former coffee shop gatherings because with Zoom each person can engage with everyone present, rather than talk to those physically next to them at the table. They are learning to listen more to each other.

Not being physically able to attend church means that members of St Joseph's miss out on participating in sacraments such as the Eucharist. While members of the church can watch another Mass being livestreamed and use their own bread and wine as representations of what the pastor would ordinarily administer, this does not meet their theological obligations as Catholics. For the congregation these religious rituals cannot occur remotely and therefore there can be no adaption of them to an online context. They must wait until church gatherings resume.

For Fr. Addicoat, many aspects of church practice involve a 'physicality' that may need to change in the future in line with current understandings of how to stop the spread of the virus. The Eucharist, for instance, involves placing the bread on the tongue or in the hand of the person receiving it, acts that are now understood to place people at risk of the virus' transmission. Many people at St Joseph's are in the

vulnerable age range. To maintain social distancing, bread and wine will need to be administered from 1.5 metres away. For Fr. Addicoat, the "symbol of the outstretched hand as a sign of welcome and of healing has overnight been negated. It is now an outstretched hand with a red cross through it." How will it be possible to listen to someone's struggles or pray with someone who has shared their burdens from a distance that takes away the intimacy of these interactions? So much of church practice involves touching—reaching out a hand to share the greeting of peace, placing a consoling hand on another person's shoulder, giving an embrace or a handshake of welcome. All of these informal elements of community may need to be renegotiated.

One of the significant ministries of St Joseph's was to welcome tourists and travellers to their church. With the tourist industry closed down and big questions over when state borders will open and international travel resume, including the fate of large cruise ships, Fr. Addicoat wonders what this ministry will look like in the future. Outreach will have a different focus if you can't "physically reach out" to people anymore.

For St Joseph's, the lockdown has been a time of being patient, fostering gratitude and appreciating the simple things. The congregation is looking forward to meeting together again soon, yet is aware that it will not be a straight forward process. How do they choose who may attend Mass if only 10, 20 or 50 people are allowed to attend? These are issues that the church, along with other religious communities, must find solutions to.

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## Discussion: Adaption, Renegotiation and Resilience

These case studies show that religious communities around Australia have been greatly impacted by the closure of their places of worship. For each of these communities the lockdown has required new ways of doing things. The practices of religious communities are based around long held traditions, rituals and sometimes even law, which are essential for providing a sense of community and shared identity. These things give structure to the week and provide meaning to day to day life. For many believers, whether or not they participate in these practices or fulfill these rituals will have eternal implications. With the closure of places of worship and restrictions on gatherings, these communities have had to engage with the challenging process of working out what elements of their tradition can continue in these circumstances, what can be adapted and what must be put aside for now. This is new territory for these communities. It has involved the renegotiation of religious law and tradition, clear direction and guidance from leaders and the managing of criticism and emotions as congregants grieve for what they have lost and adapt.

Yet these stories paint a picture of the resilience of Australia's religious communities. These communities

have been quick to take on board the government restrictions, sometimes even taking proactive measures to protect their communities before the government did so. They have worked creatively to find ways of meeting the spiritual and social needs of their communities, drawing on their own volunteer capital and financial resources to do so. However, it has not been a time for looking inwards. Many of these communities have quickly put in place new ways of reaching out to the broader Australian community, seeing the need around them and providing both tangible and intangible forms of support. The social capital that religious communities provide to the wider Australian community has not diminished in the face of new challenges, it has changed shape. There are still lots of questions about what the future holds for the outreach activities of these congregations. How will the shortfall in revenue impact these activities? What will social distancing allow or prevent them from doing? But the desire to engage with broader society and to give to others is still there.

The lockdown has reduced the visibility of religious communities. Congregants are worshipping in their home now instead of their usual places of worship. No longer are members of the Yeshiva community visible as they walk to the synagogue to participate in the Shabbat service, no longer are Muslims seen



outside Lakemba Mosque as they congregate in the overflow area or in the carpark to pray the Ramadan evening prayers. The church bells of St Joseph's are silent. What implications will this have for the acceptance of religious communities or religious practices into the future, especially as religious traditions explore the feasibility of moving more of their activities online? Research suggests the acceptance of those who are different to ourselves or 'other' is more likely to occur when we have regular exposure or interactions with them.

One of the clearest commonalities to come from the case study of these religious communities is the move to livestreaming or other forms of digital or online content. Embracing technology has allowed many of these communities to continue their religious practices in some form and provided an ongoing sense of 'community,' although there is a general acknowledgement that online community is not a real substitute for the intimacy of face to face connection or physically meeting together, especially over a meal.

Research into digitalised religion has gained currency in recent years. Technology has impacted so many areas of our lives, it was perhaps inevitable that it would enter the realm of religion as well, although the impact of the lockdown has clearly accelerated that process for many communities in Australia. Many questions are now being posed as to how religious traditions and religious practices might be impacted by the use of technology in the long term.

One important question for these religious traditions will be how they will fund their online activities and content in the long run. This is a question the Sikh Society of South Australia is already grappling with. Creating digital content will take time, money and resources. Where will this come from? There is clearly a 'market' for online religious resources in some traditions. Lakemba Mosque, St Andrew's Uniting Church and the Glen Osmond Gurdwara all have observed viewers from overseas 'consuming' their digital content but as these viewers are not congregational members, they do not contribute to the financial needs of these communities, nor to the cost of producing these resources. Who should pay? These are tricky questions each community will need to grapple with if they continue along the digital pathway. Should they ask for donations? Should they use advertising? What impact might the pressures of some form of 'commercialisation' have on the content they produce and on its spiritual and altruistic aims?

Some studies suggest that as people move to online forms of religion, they tend to become less committed to the "institutional religion".<sup>xxxv</sup> Like other forms of internet content that can be tailored to individual needs, religion can be 'customised' online by choosing preferred preachers, service times or liturgies. An outdated style of worship or an uncomfortable theological truth can be easily gotten rid of with a click of a button or an alternative choice of service. The lockdown has created an abundance of online religious services and content to choose from now, and it is easier to access

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than physically going to a new place of worship to test out a new style or theology. More options lead to more choices and to other “life-worlds” that compete for an individual’s attention.<sup>xxxvi</sup> What implications will this have for Australian congregations as they begin to engage more with the world of digitalised religion? Will they become more ‘consumeristic’ as more choices are offered to them? What will this mean for peoples’ tolerance of difference? What implications will this have for religious leaders as their traditional authority and “monopoly of religious knowledge” is challenged by alternative options or more choices?<sup>xxxvii</sup> We don’t know yet what the impact of more religious content on the internet will be for religious traditions, religious institutions or for particular congregations, and what implications this may have for social cohesion within these communities and outside them. However, it is evident that livestreaming and online religious content is here to stay, at least from the perspective of those congregations who were moved by the lockdown to go online.

Social cohesion is a process. It is dynamic, impacted by social and economic forces. The restrictions that were introduced by the government to protect Australia from the spread of COVID-19, effectively closing down places of worship, have impacted the way that religious institutions carry out their core functions and how they contribute to producing social capital, both within their congregations and in the broader community. The situation has created new challenges for religious communities as they have sought to meet the needs of their congregations and support the broader community. It has involved renegotiation over the way things have traditionally been done. However, it has also brought about the opportunity for creativity and a chance to engage with technology in new ways. Religious communities in Australia are incredibly resilient and have a long history of contributing to Australia’s social cohesion. As they emerge from under the lockdown restrictions there will be further challenges to negotiate and overcome. What the long-term implications of these changes and adaption will be is still unclear, but from the stories that are emerging, the first steps are positive.





## Notes

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