

What a worthwhile and timely project!Your observation that “much of the data is ephemeral” struck a chord in my thought and I want to send you a bit of that ephemera and some context and comments.

As you know, the Church of Christ, Scientist, is a lay church without ecclesiastical hierarchy and organized under the constitutional framework of its *Church Manual*. Church members may join both the global Church of Christ, Scientist (headquartered in Boston, Massachusetts), as well as locally-organized and run branch churches. Under the *Manual*, local churches are democratic and self-governing as they carry out the church purpose “to commemorate the word and works of our Master [Christ Jesus], which should reinstate primitive Christianity and its lost element of healing” (*Manual* p. 17). In regard to the pandemic, while there’s been loving and immediate coordination between The Mother Church in Boston and its branch churches around the world, each church has been responsible for its activities and to understand local government requirements and public health recommendations.

My role as Christian Science Committee on Publication for Arizona doesn’t in any way involve oversight of local churches, but instead is intended to provide the public with accurate information about Christian Science. In that role, a letter I wrote to an inquirer in March who asked how the church was responding to the pandemic may be of interest:

Tue, March 17, 2020

Dear _____,

Since you emailed the other day, and as I’m sure you know, the outbreak of the coronavirus (COVID-19) has been designated a pandemic by the World Health Organization and has prompted a variety of actions and recommendations by global, national, and local officials and organizations. The Church of Christ, Scientist, and Christian Scientists around the globe are taking the situation very seriously and actively joining in the worldwide response. As you may imagine, our values include daily prayer for all humanity and acknowledge our Christian and civic obligations to our neighbors, communities, and world; and we are trying our best to fulfill them.

At this time and in the spirit of seeking safety and healing for all, the church has taken a number of steps. Christian Science nurses and nursing care facilities have been informed of government requirements and recommendations during this outbreak. Church workers have been asked to cancel travel plans and to work from home. Our denomination’s headquarters in Boston has been in touch with branch churches and members worldwide to keep them informed and encourage them to be aware of and responsive to local and national requirements and recommendations by officials. As you may be aware, this is consistent with our long history of respect for and cooperation with public health authorities, which includes obeying the law, abiding by quarantines, respecting the public good, and practicing spiritual healing responsibly.

In addition and for some weeks now, *The Christian Science Monitor* has been covering the circumstances of this pandemic in its [ongoing reportage](#). Religious articles on the subject have also been published or republished (for example, see [“Spiritual Immunity”](#) by Jer Master from the *Christian Science Sentinel*, 1-2-2006), as well as testimonies of healing of contagious disease. And local congregations have been addressing the matter in Wednesday testimony meetings and other responsible ways. The church has

also set up a landing page on its website, ChristianScience.com, for sharing information, and especially, spiritual ideas to help address and heal this situation called "[Praying in response to the coronavirus.](#)"

We know there will be a great deal more to do in the days and weeks ahead to respond to the latest developments, particularly as a church and people who yearn to demonstrate that God's tremendous love for His children — which includes all humanity — as well as His infinite power to heal are as available now as in the days of old when Christ Jesus healed multitudes.

I hope this begins to answer your question.

Yours sincerely,

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When it comes to the response of individual churches in Arizona, I can share from the experience of my own branch church where I also serve as first reader (one of two elected church members who conduct church services).

Suspending in-person services and holding worship via Zoom has meant some adjustment, but we've found it hasn't interfered with meaningful worship in any serious way. In fact, most of us have felt to one degree or another, that our relationship with God, our desire to follow Christ Jesus in daily life, our mutual love within the congregation, and our active care for our world are *deepening*—sometimes in surprising ways. A church truly isn't its building. And we feel sincerely that the love of God that embraces "the body of Christ" and all its members, extends to every human heart without exception. We believe we are *all* God's equally loved children, regardless of religion, culture, or gender, and this includes our neighbors who have no religion. We also have seen time and again in our lives that the spiritual understanding of God as divine Love can bring actual physical healing to the human body, can redeem from sin, and bring harmony to every kind of problem.

The switch to online video/phone Zoom services at our branch church took place rapidly at the end of March and we didn't miss a single service. Normally we hold two services each week, worship services on Sunday and midweek testimony meetings on Wednesday evenings. Our congregation is small, but as we've been hearing from other churches and religious groups, we found there's been increased attendance at the Zoom services; and it has continued over the months. We've had new visitors and members' family worshipping with us — some from out of state — including a woman from Seattle who volunteers to feed the homeless, and a man from the Republic of Congo who devotes his life to the ministry of Christian healing through prayer. Some who've attended services intermittently in the past or had stopped attending altogether are attending regularly by Zoom.

Our first Zoom service was on a Wednesday evening. Because half of the meeting is normally set aside for spontaneous thanks to God and testimony by congregants, and because most

members were unfamiliar with Zoom or with what it might mean to be testifying in such a public way, the board sent the following message:

March 23, 2020

Re: Joining our Wednesday testimony meeting March 25 at 7:30pm

Dear members and friends of First Church of Christ, Scientist, Tucson,

Part of the joy and power of our Wednesday testimony meetings is that they may “give bread to the hungry and living water to the thirsty” (Annie Knott, [“The Golden Rule,”](#) *Christian Science Sentinel*, June 3, 1911). We hope you’ll join us for such spiritual food and drink this [Wednesday, March 25 at 7:30PM](#) via Zoom or phone. See below for information about how to join the meeting. (Note: The Zoom link and phone number are different for Wednesdays than for Sundays.)

Taking part

Naturally, this meeting, like every testimony meeting, will follow the order of services in our *Church Manual*. For the testimony portion this week, it seems nearest right to read aloud healings through prayer to God that have already been published in our periodicals. With that in mind, we’d welcome you sending the link or date, name, page number, and periodical/book of testimonies of healing that would be appropriate for this occasion. It’s not a question of gathering the most remarkable healings, but of those which can speak humbly and convincingly of the Christ to the human heart, right in the midst of our current circumstances. The article by Annie Knott (linked to above) discusses what truly answers human need. The testimonies you send can cover a variety of topics and come from a variety of decades, but it would be helpful if many were from recent years.

We may not be able to share all of the testimonies you send in, but your spiritual preparation along with sending in published healings, will enable this meeting to afford “proof of its utility” (*Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*, Mary Baker Eddy, 583:14). And that quiet, healing proof is needed by our community and world now, more than ever.

Please send testimonies to our first reader —— and to board member ——.

Executive Board

Within a couple weeks it became clear that members were ready and willing to overcome the technical and other obstacles and return to testifying spontaneously on Wednesday evenings from their homes. This we’ve done. We haven’t made a count or taken notes, but the impression is that more of the congregation is testifying, thanking God, and sharing humbly how turning to Him has freed them from fear, or relationship problems, or sickness, or some type of sin. Many share how they’ve been praying about the pandemic, racial injustice, and even the forest fires roaring through the nearby mountains (which have been dramatically visible by day and night for weeks). The physical healings people share usually tell how someone has gained a deeper, spiritual understanding of God’s nature and their (and everyone’s) relationship to Him through study of the Bible, by following Jesus more closely, by reading Christian Science materials, or simply by earnest, honest prayer and listening for His guidance.

Along with congregational testimony, the Wednesday meetings also include shortish readings from the Bible and from the textbook of Christian Science, Mary Baker Eddy's *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* (which is considered a denominational textbook, and not a second Scripture). Hymns, silent prayer, and the Lord's Prayer complete the meeting. The topic is chosen and the readings compiled by the local first reader. The readings normally address a topic of timely concern to the community, nation, or world and offer the congregation fresh spiritual food to comfort and stir hearts, and to encourage congregants to actively respond to and heal the challenges at hand as Christ Jesus taught us to.

In my church over the months of the pandemic and as the protests for racial justice have gotten underway, readings have covered the following subjects:

- Prayer that heals
- Safety and security on the Rock of Christ, Truth
- What it means today to sacrifice for others and drink of Christ's cup now
- How Christ heals the sick and casts out evil now, as of old
- Praying for humanity during a period of contagious disease
- The perfection of God, and what that means in the midst of imperfection
- "Lo, I am with you alway"
- Three kinds of prayer to God
- The spiritual power of honesty
- The power of divine Truth over falsehood
- Everlasting life
- Genuine brotherhood involves justice and mercy
- How the Comforter promised by Jesus heals grief.

We conduct Zoom services from the auditorium of our church with only three or four members physically present—the readers and the two members who do tech support—with the congregation joining online or by phone. Given the current situation in Arizona with cases of COVID-19 spiking, the church decided to continue holding online services. Instead of live music, we've turned to recorded postludes, preludes, hymns, and solos.

The regular order of services is laid out in our *Church Manual*. Along with an opening selection from Scripture, the singing of three hymns, silent prayer, the Lord's Prayer, a solo, and a benediction, congregants at Sunday services in Christian Science churches around the world hear the same Bible Lesson-Sermon read aloud. This actually simplifies going online. The Bible Lessons (but not the opening Scripture, hymns, solo, or benediction) are compiled at The Mother Church in Boston and cover the groundwork of our theology and all the vital doctrines of Christian faith—including God, Christ Jesus, our loved and loving relationship to God and each other, and so on. These Bible Lessons are published in the *Christian Science Quarterly* and are studied by most Christian Scientists, individually, throughout the week, prior to hearing them read aloud at Sunday services. When the congregation comes together on Sundays, even remotely, there can be a special spirit of love and healing that flows from the collective prayer and inspiration of a congregation responding afresh to the Word they've studied during the week.

Church announcements are another part of the services that are naturally unique to each congregation. Following is a set of announcements that we've been using to help orient visitors

to the unprecedented circumstances of the global pandemic and the great need humanity has for comfort, help, and healing. These comments were from our Zoom Sunday service, March 29, 2020, (and naturally have changed as the situation has changed):

Opening comment:

Welcome! This is the Sunday morning worship service of First Church of Christ, Scientist, Tucson, Arizona. We're together online or by phone instead of in person, but we know that the spirit of Jesus' words remains true: "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20).

We'll be following the regular order of services in our *Church Manual*. You may want to have a copy of the *Christian Science Quarterly*, as well as our two hymnals on hand. We'll begin our service this morning with singing, and we hope you'll join in. Hymn #115.

[Read hymn]

Announcements:

The members of this church join us [the two readers they could see on Zoom] in welcoming everyone online or on the phone to this service. Our church has taken the global situation very seriously and is actively responding. Our values include daily prayer for all humanity and acknowledge our Christian and civic obligations to our neighbors, communities, and world; and we are trying our best to fulfill them.

We're a church and a congregation who yearn to see and live more fully God's tremendous love for His children, which includes everyone, everywhere. We believe that God's love *heals*, and that it is as available now to all of us, right in the midst of these challenging times, as in the days of old when Christ Jesus healed multitudes.

This conviction comes from the Bible, from the unequalled life and saving mission of Christ Jesus, which the teachings of Christian Science illumine, as well as from our individual *experience* of the redeeming and healing power of God, who is divine Love itself. We worship on Sundays at this hour to learn more about God, to feel His presence, and to respond to His love. We gather for testimony meetings on Wednesdays to share our actual experience of His love and goodness.

This week's Wednesday evening meeting will also be streamed online or available by phone. We'll use the same Zoom link and phone number as last Wednesday, but will send out a reminder to those on our mailing list. This information is also posted on our web page, which is cstucson.org. That's cstucson.org. If you'd like to be added to our mailing list, please send your email address to clerk@cstucson.org.

This church is a branch of a global church, The First Church of Christ, Scientist, in Boston, Massachusetts, which was founded more than 140 years ago by Mary Baker Eddy. The purpose of The Mother Church and its branches is "to commemorate the word and works of our Master [Christ Jesus], which should reinstate primitive Christianity and its lost element of healing."

Normally we would invite you to learn more about us, not only through worshipping with us, but by visiting our Reading Room, which is in our church building. However, in response to government and public health recommendations, the Reading Room, like our church services, will be closed until further notice. There are still many other

resources available to you. The Bible and *Science and Health* are available to read or listen to online, and we've added links to these on our website, cstucson.org. There are also many resources available at christianscience.com. If you would like to read some Christian Science literature, such as *The Christian Science Journal* or the *Christian Science Sentinel*, which include testimonies of healing, please email our clerk at clerk@cstucson.org and we'll be glad to send some.

You might also wish to stay up to date on the current pandemic with straightforward news and unbiased reporting through *The Christian Science Monitor*. The *Monitor* has prepared a webpage with news and commentary on the subject. You can go to csmonitor.com and search for "Coronavirus." The *Monitor's* stories throughout this crisis have been consistent with their object, to injure no one, "but to bless all mankind."

[Recorded solo]

Collection:

At this part of the service, we normally pause for the offering. We obviously can't do that today, but we can be grateful for all that each one of you, and all humanity, are already *offering* to our community, nation, world—and to God—in prayer, humility, and willingness to sacrifice and to help one another. The best offering any of us can give is the demonstration of the power of God, of Love, through Christ, to take away sin and suffering.

[Let's sing]

As we progressed, the church realized we needed specific time for the congregation to be together informally, so we started a "virtual lobby" after each service, and added this to the announcements:

Following the postlude this morning, we'll open up Zoom so that we can have a "virtual lobby." All that means is that if you want to stick around and talk together, you can. We'll unmute you and turn on your video, or you can unmute your phones or computers, and we'll be able to hear or see each other and talk together, as if we were together in the lobby after church. Of course if you want to keep your video off, that's fine, too. But it's nice to hang out a little.

Apart from worship and testimony meetings, church members have held business and inspirational meetings online. They've been praying together specifically to address the problems of the pandemic and these times, as God guides them. We held a Zoom meeting in May to share the inspiration of our prayers. A second meeting is scheduled in July for further sharing and discussion of members' ongoing prayer for the world.

The congregation has been tremendously supportive of these Zoom services, and a couple reports of healing taking place at the services have come in, (which is not uncommon for our in-person services, too). There's also been a quiet stream of brief thank you emails and notes to the readers, to the executive board, and to the treasurer (along with contributions) that speak sweetly to the significance of church in our lives at this time and ongoing. Here are a handful of those:

- Dear First Church . . . , Thank you for continuing to provide the beautiful virtual services on Sunday & Wednesday. So many blessings have come from these services in our house. With love — [name]
- Dear First Church, Thank you for the beautiful Sunday & Wednesday services via Zoom. They have been a big blessing to us. Love — [names]
- Thank you for all good work!
- Dear First Church, Thank you for providing the online services during this time. It's a real blessing and comfort and we are so glad we are able to attend. Please add me to your email list. Many thanks, — [name]
- Thank you! Our church can never be “closed” — much love, [name].
- Dear friends, Thank you . . . the Zoom Wed & Sunday services are outstanding & I thank the readers and [members who do tech support] for all they contribute unselfishly. Much love, [name]
- Thank you for serving the church! I'm so grateful to have had this church to attend and support for over 46 years now — Much love, [name]
- Hi — Thank you for the beautiful church services Wednesdays and Sundays. We will return soon to our regular services I am sure. Love, [name]
- Hello Friend, [The Wednesday] lesson was so helpful, accepting and understanding the Christ I also liked having the old hymn book and familiar songs You are all doing such good work, and being “first responders,” bringing God, Truth, and His healing response to hungering hearts. . . . Love, [name]
- Dear Executive Board . . . Thought you should know, if you haven't already heard, that Gov. Ducey extended the stay-at-home order for Arizonans to May 15, with certain modifications. Social distancing is still part of the mix. Here's a [link](#) that gives fuller details.

It's curious how social distancing hasn't worked quite the way [the world] would expect This church is actively embracing members and congregation in a fresh new way, more seem to be attending, and even the "virtual lobby" is bringing people closer, And even as we continue to hold online services and accept the six-feet-away rule in the spirit of the Golden Rule, Christian Science shows us that we can't possibly be separated from God's spiritual and constant embrace Grateful to you all, on the front lines in your own homes, [in prayer]. Love, [name]

- Just a note before I take my walk. I was so impressed with last night's service It felt like services I heard years ago and took me to a special place. I can hardly wait for the Sunday service.

A collection of data can't always show the *spirit* a congregation feels, but that last comment — the congregant who “can hardly wait” for the next online church service — suggests how deeply church, at its best, matters to those seeking the answers that God’s Word gives. We’re learning that our God who *is* Light, can guide us in every circumstance and shine His love through the darkest of times. And that a church that tries its best to follow the golden rule and the Sermon on the Mount, can find the truth that makes everyone free, as Christ Jesus said—the truth that right now, even in the midst of these dark and troubling time, every child, man, or woman is beloved by God, “who is a very present help in trouble” (Ps. 46:1).

Yours sincerely,

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