

# Half in

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Acts 2:14: 1-4, 14-41; Luke 24:13-35

Rev Jean Shannon

We talk about Hybrid cars and Hybrid conferences and even hybrid churches. Most churches zoomed during the pandemic. When we were all in lock-down, it was like a classroom, multi-participatory and interactive. Later, as churches got more tech savvy, they began to live stream or broadcast on Facebook and YouTube. This way, they could add atmosphere and choirs. Many churches continue today. Those who have not, have noticed a drop in attendance. Look around you. There would be at least 6 regular attendees who did not return after lockdown. They attended on-line but never turned up in person again.

Donna Schaper said many of her friends preferred the ‘shopping’ aspect of hybrid worship more than the communal aspects of place-based worship.<sup>1</sup>

Virtual church-goers can shop around for the Minister they really like or go to a different cathedral every week. They like being invisible, in control, staying in their pyjamas and whether they admit it or not – it’s free. No plate – no offering – no embarrassed scrambling around for something less than a \$50 bill. This is safe and anonymous.

Some will argue, it’s more intimate just like radio feels so one-on-one. But it’s not. Live streaming is one way<sup>2</sup>. You *believe* you have a relationship but you are invisible. The dulcet voice of Jim McLeod<sup>3</sup> crooned me to sleep for 20 years. He’ll never know how much I loved him.

Those churches that have continued on-line have maintained their numbers and, in many cases, increased– but not necessarily their income unless they have found a way to monetise engagement – I’ll come back to that. I don’t know how they go filling their rosters and maintaining and increasing volunteers for outreach programs.

Weirdly, my mother spent the last 20 years of her life watching PTL TV. Praise the Lord television is an evangelical, highly successful and *very* lucrative enterprise. I say weirdly, because my mother was agnostic and about as far away from evangelical or even spiritual as a human can get. She was a cynic to her bootstraps and yet she had the TV on in her apartment 24 hours a day.

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<sup>1</sup> Hybridity – *Running from empty* UCC Lent devotional 23 p. 32

<sup>2</sup> Unless you are still connected to an interactive zoom church

<sup>3</sup> [Jim McLeod Retires from ABC after 48 Years - RadiInfo Australia](#)

The main theme that struck me – was what God could do for you. The channel never talked about what you could do for God – other than send money.

I never saw a program that talked about their community or their mission other than speaking directly to the individuals watching. Individuals – not a body or THE body of Christ, Individuals free to go to the bathroom – or make lunch while they were praising the Lord.

Mother never sent any money, not that I know of, but that didn't stop her from getting on the mailing list and being bombarded with letters offering her more grace if she sent more money.<sup>4</sup>

What bothers me about broadcast church – is it allows people to be ½ in. This is not the Hokey-Pokey – it is the body of Christ. Comfortably remote, doesn't cut it – it sends us back to box-ticking, maintaining rituals for rituals sake – all with a view of what God can do for ME. I'm safe behind the glass wall. I don't have to DO anything.

When Peter addressed the crowd about what happened – and they were cut to the heart, they asked, “Brother, what shall we do?”

And Peter called on them to commit – totally commit; To change their ways, their direction and become part of something. 3000 people joined that day...they didn't go home and think about it.

What happens when the 'church' is isolated behind the glass – when there is a distance between those they are supposed to love and care for? Well, don't start me on the politics and influence of the tele-evangelists. Let me just say, I fail to see the love and concern for the people that Jesus would have seen: women, the weak, the poor, the broken, prisoners, foreigners, the sick, the dying, - shall I go on? People are only as useful as a television audience or a studio audience to create atmosphere and drama. Sadly, people queued and paid for tickets to be in the studio audience (just as they would for Oprah) with the hope that the hand of God would reach out to them. The need, the drive to be there was strong to make it real.

Even main-stream church decision-makers can become isolated from those they are supposed to love. They can choose to be ½-in Christians. We can all name examples. Most recently, a prominent Christian church has announced that no LBGQI student

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<sup>4</sup> My favourite begging letter included a free handkerchief. If you sent money, it would activate the handkerchief. Then you could place it on the floor, kneel and pray for whatever you needed...and God would deliver.

should hold a leadership role in their schools...and it was up to a 16 year old to write an opinion piece in the Sydney Morning Herald to remind them of their faith.<sup>5</sup>

Daniel Cash is a gay school captain at Melbourne Grammar. He wrote:

The Christian faith is built on the example Christ set in his life. His revolutionary compassion, so radical then as it still is now – care for the outcasts, the lepers, the unclean – inform the values of Christianity and direct the moral constitution of the Church. Jesus shocked the established powers of his time, his love the instrument of a legacy which left a world faith developing in its wake.

His example leads me to wonder what Christ would make of this situation. If he was confronted with a body of young people, would he remind the church leaders that these young people were made in the image of God, or would he divide them and cast inequality among their ranks?<sup>6</sup>

He goes onto say the beauty of his generation is the total disinterest in sexuality. His peers know he's gay and they don't care. Their judgement is about the whole person. "This strength in character, this security of identity, is characteristic of the best leaders," is it not? He calls on the church to readjust its thinking to better reflect a positive and healthy outlook rather than harming both its place in the modern world and the safety of its adolescents. He says:

Those people behind this submission to the ALRC need to exhibit the compassion which their faith is built on...

Organised religion is a powerful force for positivity. Those groups which tarnish the name of spirituality by using it to justify prejudice do a disservice to all people of faith, and they endanger all those who fall under their care.

The damage we do when we distance ourselves from each other. I grew up in a place where white people worshiped here and sang these songs and black people worshipped there and sang a totally different tune. Now look at the state of affairs.

I don't believe we can be ½-in. Just this leg, just this arm – just when I feel like turning on the TV. Cleopas and his mates didn't continue in the direction they were headed.

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<sup>5</sup> Daniel Cash, "I'm a Grammar's school captain and I'm gay", SMH 18 April 23. Opinion section

<sup>6</sup> Edited to summarise and removed the name of the church

They got up, turned around and headed back to Jerusalem at once...and they went and found the 11 and those assembled with them.

Phiwa Langeni wrote a reflection called “Hokey-Pokey”<sup>7</sup>...which pointed out the parts of the Body of Christ is made up of diversity. Honouring and bearing witness without judgement or shame is essential. The arm doesn’t have to be like the leg.

Phiwa challenges us to put our whole selves in and yet, to make room for others. The reflection climax asks us, once we are totally in, to shake it all about. That means speaking out when we see injustices and turning ourselves around when we find ourselves aligning with ‘isms’ that divide us.

Luke’s story has many layers to offer us. The foundation in the scriptures; the confirmation of women’s witness, the importance of prophets and Jesus as a prophet, and the greater reward for hospitality to strangers. While all that is very important, what speaks to me is when people were ‘cut to the heart’ they committed...and how the personal conversation, face to face on the road, made their hearts burn – and they turned around and headed for their people.

You can’t do that, you can’t have that – if you are 1/2-in: ½ in your church or ½ in your theology. If you believe that Jesus would have accepted these people, as Peter says. “fellow Jews and all who live in Jerusalem” then we have no choice.

IF we believe in His teachings of love and equality  
AND we believe in the power of hospitality and engagement  
AND we know we are baptised into a union  
then I have no choice. I can’t be ½ in.

Amen

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<sup>7</sup> Hokety-Pokey- Phiwa Langeni- March 18 2023, 2023 Lenten devotional p 30