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## 'God Pod' helps churchgoers to connect despite dangers of COVID-19

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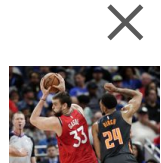
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Baxter Joel Cruise (right) sits with Glenn Bostock in the 'God Pod' that has a glass partition between the two sides

PASTOR JOEL CROUSE (right) sits with GLENN BOSTOCK in the God Pod, that has a glass partition between the two sides and an air filtration system to prevent the spread of COVID-19, on June 5, 2020. Mr. Bostock's company made the pod for St. John's Lutheran Church, Ottawa.

JACK BURKOM/HANDOUT

For many, the COVID-19 pandemic has meant processing life's hurdles while physically isolated from community. When Isabelle Geraets-Rose's uncle passed away from lung cancer, she attended his virtual funeral in Germany from her Ottawa home, and held a small prayer session by herself.

"If you think about how lonely that was – my own little altar in my own little place," she says. "And I did feel something, you know, but it wasn't anything like going to church."

She met her pastor for a grief counselling session at St. John's Lutheran Church that afternoon, but the meeting was unlike any she'd had in the era of physical distancing. They sat less than two metres apart from each other, and weren't wearing any masks. They were sitting inside the "God Pod:" a 4-foot by 6-foot enclosed meeting space that looks like an altered and pandemic-proofed confessional booth.

It allows people living in different social bubbles to meet in proximity by sitting on either side of a glass wall, without risking the spread of COVID-19.

The air in both compartments is HEPA-filtered, and a small filter between both sides allows sound to travel for conversation. Chairs and a table complete the environment where face-to-face conversations can happen without wearing masks or personal protective equipment.

"Psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, pastors, parole officers ... we're all trained to need to use our [emotional intelligence] and read social cues from people," says Rev. Joel Crouse, pastor at the church. He says the pod has been used for casual meetings and prayer, but also for grief and marriage counselling sessions.

"And since the pandemic started, that whole aspect to conversation, interview, counselling, whatever you're doing, is lost."

The consultation pod, which he calls the God Pod "because it sounds cooler," has allowed

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these facial features that suggest that they are so grateful to have had the experience to be that

close to somebody that they care for, or wanted to see.”

The pod was manufactured and given as a gift to St. John’s by SnapCab, a company whose Kingston headquarters usually manufactures enclosed office work spaces. SnapCab designed the pod after hearing Mr. Crouse’s concerns that consultations of all sorts were lacking their human edge during the pandemic.

They donated the prototype to the church and are hoping to keep perfecting the model, which owner Glenn Bostock says could be used for meetings across professions, “whether you’re coming into a hospital, an office building, a law firm, a medical health centre, or a church.”

Human communication heavily relies on non-verbal information exchanges, says Steve Joordens, a professor of psychology at the University of Toronto Scarborough. These cues can be emitted through body posture, facial expressions, the height of one’s gaze, the tone of their tone of voice, or even the way they blink.

“That emotional conversation that’s happening is critical to therapeutic context,” says Prof. Joordens, who believes the pod could be useful. “It’s what the good therapist attends to and kind of recognizes.”

The God Pod has already been used more than 35 times since being set up in St. John’s Lutheran Church. Mr. Crouse says the church opened its use to the community at-large, and that time slots can be booked by contacting the church office.

A strict cleaning protocol is in place, which he says was vetted by Ottawa Public Health, to ensure the device is sanitized between each use by a team of volunteers.

Ms. Geraets-Rose, who used the God Pod in June, says she felt a sense of “release,” stepping into church for the first time since it had closed, and speaking to Mr. Crouse up close in a safe environment.

Her biggest take-away, however, came after their conversation slowly turned into an exchange of jokes. She realized it was the first time she had laughed freely outside of her home in months.

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“It’s almost like having that can kind of keep you going for another month of this weird life where you’re not connected to a congregation.”

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