



# The Distanced Church

Reflections on Doing  
Church Online

Heidi A Campbell, Editor

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***The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online***

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***A Distanced Church in a Time of Pandemic...  
An Introduction***

Heidi A Campbell

**My Quarantine Story**

In March 2020, I found myself in central Germany, where I was supposed to be for the spring doing research at an internet studies institute. International media was focused on this new-to-many concept of “social distancing” and unpacking the growing threat of the COVID-19 virus — what it meant for people across the globe. By the second weekend of the month, my husband and I found ourselves sequestered in a 200-square-foot studio apartment while we recovered from shared colds. It was on social media that we learned about the USA shutting down its borders to international travelers and the call for American citizens to return home and go into self-quarantine. As we attempted to make plans to return to the USA, I was glued to Facebook and Twitter, following European and North American responses to the pandemic.

I clearly remember waking up Sunday morning, March 15<sup>th</sup>, and logging on to Facebook to check the global news curated by my friends. Amidst health-advice posts on how best to protect oneself against the virus, and reports of different countries’ governmental responses to the pandemic, I noticed something unexpected on my message stream. It was filled with a steady flow of recorded videos and livestreams by various church services that I had never seen before. Previously, I could count on one hand the number of friends who would share links to their church services via Facebook on a typical Sunday. That day, I watched parts of 20 different church services from around the world. Some were very slick and professional video productions, but most were shaky or beginner attempts at broadcasting a worship

service online for the first time. I marveled especially at people I knew who were digitally hesitant and pastors I had spoken to who were critical of doing church online showing up on my Facebook stream. It seemed many churches had been caught off guard by the effects of the pandemic and were forced to make a quick digital transition due to lockdowns, quarantines, and shelter-in-place orders.

Over the past month, I have noticed a steady increase in online worship services being streamed on my Facebook feed. I have had the privilege of attending and observing over 60 different churches and their services around the world. As a researcher who has spent her career studying religious communities’ use and negotiation of digital media, this has been a wonderful laboratory of analyzing the dominant digital strategies used by religious leaders. I have recorded many of these observations in a growing video and image database. My feed is regularly filled with articles by church consultants on practical suggestions, such as the basics of doing church services or small groups via Zoom or how to set up a YouTube channel for your church. Facebook groups have surfaced focused on theological debates about doing church digitally — e.g., the challenge of doing virtual communion — and bloggers are reflecting on how technology use may influence church liturgy. Even I have added to this growing literature, sharing lessons from my multiple research studies on best practices and theological considerations for doing church online.

In the midst of this, I had a “crazy” idea. Why not bring people together who are struggling with and studying what it means to do church online into some sort of organized conversation? Like most of the world, I was stuck at home “sheltering-in-place,” and the lack of opportunities to go outside at this time

had left me with extra time on my hands. I started my search for conversation partners where this journey all began, on Facebook. I made a list of church leaders and scholars I, personally, would like to have this conversation with on this topic from among my 800+ friends of Facebook. I sent out an invitation email, and, to my surprise, almost everyone said yes, they would love to contribute to this project.

Just over three weeks elapsed between the day I sent out the invitation emails and the day this project appeared in final form. This has been a quick, but purposeful journey. My goal has been to capture this particular moment in religious history, when many Christian communities and churches around the world have been forced to go online in order to continue meeting in this season of controlled gathering and the coronavirus. Of course, the voices represented in this project are select, coming from amongst my diverse friends and contacts online. Nevertheless, I have tried my best to bring together a variety of voices from different countries, denominations, and expressions of church.

### **Reflecting on a Distanced Church**

I chose to call this book *“The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online.”* The phrase *“The Distanced Church”* comes from the much-talked-about concept of social distancing, which refers to keeping space between one’s self and others in social settings. It also has the connotation of people consciously avoiding crowds or being banned from meeting in groups (10 or more in the American context), and keeping a set physical distance from others (i.e., 6 feet in the USA, 1.5 to 2 meters in European contexts). Some suggest that the term *“physical distancing”* is a more accurate and appropriate term. This is because discussion around social distancing primarily focuses on policies or recommendations about refraining from or constraining one’s physical

presence around others. Some have argued that the idea of social distancing is highly problematic, because, it is suggested, physical separation at times of increased isolation will lead to increased fear, anxiety, and depression.

This is especially true of the idea of social distancing as it relates to the church, a concept built on the ideas of a people gathered, the Body of Christ, and embodied incarnation. It is with these thoughts and this rationale I have chosen the title *The Distanced Church*. This book is about a church where members are physically separated from one another due to specific health concerns and safety regulations. Yet the church is still called to be a social institution, where people engage, support, and care for one another. The concept of *The Distanced Church* suggests church leaders need to find alternatives to physical gatherings and spaces, and are engaging technological options to do this. But while some consider or debate whether online church is a disembodied entity, I would argue that it is still one that is based on social interaction and relational desires. This is an issue raised in essays offered by a number of scholars and church leaders in this collection. *The Distanced Church* is one where people are physical separated from one another but still spiritually interconnected and in need of some modified forms of technologically facilitated social interaction. This and other related ideas are explored in the essays that follow.

As noted above, this e-book project is an experiment in trying to create an accessible international dialogue on how religious practitioners, church leaders, theologians, and media scholars are reflecting on how the global COVID-19 pandemic has forced churches to close their doors and move online. This is also my first time producing an e-book. The goal was to collect stories and research expertise and quickly get it out into the public in a timely manner, so it can benefit the many religious

communities and institutions wrestling with the sudden move of having to do religious services via digital platforms and minister through digitally mediated contexts. This book includes 30 essays that I hope offer useful reflection for religious leaders and communities considering the practical and theological challenges of doing church online.

The aim of this volume is to bring together religious leaders, pastors, theologians, and media scholars to share their reflections about what it is like to do and think through church online during this time of quarantine and social distancing.

### **Overview of the Book**

Section One of the book is called, *“Lessons from the Online Trenches: Church Leaders’ Stories of Going Online.”* In it, I invited a group of church leaders to contribute their reflections on what it has been like to think through and implement new ways of doing church online. This group includes pastors, priests, church staff, and religious digital creatives from around the world. Some of these leaders are experimenting for the first time with doing church online, while others have an established track record in using digital media and incorporating digital media into their church settings. All of these individuals have been asked to reflect out loud about their experiences of thinking through what it means to minister online and lead digitally mediated worship online at this time. This section of the book focuses on church leaders’ personal stories and the lessons they have learned by experimenting online at this time. The hope is that these stories will help religious and church leaders struggling with or thinking through the move towards online worship.

Section Two is entitled, *“Wisdom from Scholars of Digital Religion and Theology: Research Reflections about Doing Church Online.”* In it, a

diverse group of international theologians and media scholars working in the areas of Digital Religion studies and Digital Theology, have been invited to reflect on what insights their research has to offer those negotiating their use of digital media and platforms in this new context. All of these scholars had been writing about the practical and theological implications of doing church online long before the pandemic began. Their essays reflect on specific aspects of their work and research that might apply to the current situation churches find themselves in due to the somewhat forced and sudden move online. This section also provides an overview of key themes researchers over the past decade have explored about doing church online. Here, they share their research findings in light of the key issues they feel need to be considered by religious leaders and institutions trying to use digital media and integrate network technologies into their practice.

Both groups were asked to tailor their essays to respond to one or more of the following set of questions:

- What are the biggest challenges for churches/religious leaders going online, and why?
- What has your experience/research taught you about the important issues religious communities and church leaders must consider when making the move to doing church online?
- How has the current situation (i.e., the COVID-19 pandemic, negotiating times of quarantine, closing of churches, calls for social distancing, etc.) influenced how you do or see the church in a digital age?

In the essays that follow, we will hear many unique stories of church leaders' digital experimentation, as well as stories that ring true from many pastors simply trying to manage transitioning from offline to online ministry. Researchers offer accounts from their investigations of church online and explain how these apply to, or provide valuable insights into, the current move online. Together, the essays in *The Distanced Church* collection offer a range of shared and diverse reflections about what it is like to do and think through church online during this time of quarantine and social distancing.

### **It Takes a Village**

A project like this is not a solo endeavor. This e-book would not have become a reality if it were not for a number of key supporters and collaborators. First, I would like to thank all the essay authors who took up the challenge to reflect and write up their stories in two weeks, while many of them were dealing with their own challenges, such as recording and webcasting a variety of church services during Easter, a very busy time in the Christian church calendar. Others were faced with teaching and getting their courses online for the first time, while working from home and dealing with the chaos of family navigating a unique new social situation. Second, I want to thank Sophia Osteen, my research assistant, who worked hard and quickly, assisting me in organizing and reviewing these essays, and rapidly learning the wonders of e-book publishing to help make this collection a reality. Third, I am grateful for my friend and copyeditor extraordinaire Kathy DiSanto who edited and reformatted this entire manuscript in just five days—you are a wonder. Last, but certainly not least, I want to thank my patient and encouraging husband who is always willing to support my crazy ideas. He served as a valuable sounding board for this project, offering prayerful advice. I could not have done this without him!

## *Lessons from the Online Trenches: Church Leaders Stories of Going Online*



-1-

**Turning Flavor of the Month into Staple Diet**

Albert Bogle

*In this short essay, Albert Bogle reflects on COVID-19 and the opportunities it has offered churches to explore more collaborative missional projects with artists, musicians, and techies, and suggests the present interest in digital communication among church leaders might lead to new understanding of digital*

When word got out that the Scottish Government was banning public meetings including church services, due to the growing threat of COVID-19, I received an email from my son. It read, “Dear Noah, now that you’ve been building the Ark for the past twenty years, perhaps the doubters among your ministerial colleagues will begin to take the ministry of Sanctuary First more seriously. Your time has come.” I smiled and prayed that God wouldn’t shut the Ark door too quickly in order to allow the late adopters an opportunity to get on board.

I’m glad this is now actually beginning to happen. Many church leaders who never thought of the internet as a tool for Christian worship and communication have been forced to think again. I received an email from a minister who is aligned with the conservative side of the Church’s reformed theological debate. He was asking if I could contribute a paper on the validity of the Lord’s Supper, if it is offered as an online experience. Such an email would never have been written by someone from that wing of the Church before COVID-19. Coming from his theological stance, the digital world and the world of theology have been kept in separate compartments of life experience. Necessity in believing the

sacraments to be essential to the Church has forced a rethink about digital experiences.

The wonderful thing is, literally thousands of church leaders throughout the world have started to engage with livestreaming. Others have taken to using social media to post messages of hope and encouragement to their parishioners. I find all of this encouraging because I’m also aware of the creative spark of the Holy Spirit working in the many gifted leaders who have been called to ministry in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Before long, I’m convinced that a growing number of these early/late adopters will begin to ponder what it is that they are livestreaming and how they can begin to livestream better. They will ask themselves, “How can I use these media for missional purposes?” Before long, the penny will drop that simply streaming out “real-time hymn prayer sandwich services” from a mobile on to a Facebook page has limitations and a very limited audience. It is certainly not the most effective missional program to use, especially during this time of lockdown. However, with a ready-made home audience, the opportunity to do something creative and interactive is a wide-open door for Christians to use. Because of this, I believe we will see an increase in more creative productions.

Before long, the need for proper theological thinking and training linked to the creative side of engaging worship content will become an essential part of mainstream ministerial training and thinking. This, of course, was beginning to take root in the Church of Scotland before COVID-19, not out of a conviction that digital ministry in itself is worthwhile or even missional, but because of the necessity created by falling church rolls and fewer people coming forward for training. The COVID-19 virus has simply accelerated the need for livestreaming services. The real prize is to go further and allow the theology of imagination

to begin to create new networked church communities on- and offline.

The present crisis is an excellent opportunity for the church to begin to reach out to the creatives in this area. This will be for many a missional opportunity, as they start to include those on the edge of faith, the artists, the musicians, the techies, the honest inquirers, those who are not far from the Kingdom of God. These are the people we need to invite to help us begin to understand the specific nuances of various media and also how to promote and develop and shape the Gospel of Jesus in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Within days of the lockdown, when all coffee shops and hotels had been officially closed down, we launched the Sanctuary First Coffee Shop. This has proved to be an important innovation. It means that we have regulars every day dropping into the site for a chat with their coffee. In addition to this, we have now transferred our connect groups and book clubs all into the Coffee Shop, along with the Friday night music slot for creatives. The interesting truth is, if we do it in the manner of Jesus' example, we will find many who come to the well of Jacob thirsty and longing for acceptance.

At the heart of this collaborative vision to renew the church using creatives and techies is a passion to enable many who have been disengaged or disconnected from Christianity to have an opportunity to reconnect. We sit at a strategic watershed in the media age. Digital convergence means that production of quality media is now more accessible and more cost effective to a much wider range of people. In addition, the mushrooming of digital services through web, satellite, and cable provides many more outlets for good products.

The growing numbers of churches who are starting to explore the use of audio, visual, digital content as a means of enhancing their communication also highlights the shortage of thoughtful, honest, and engaging Christian apologetic material for both adults and children.

There is a new opportunity to pioneer a radical approach to worship — one that will be more relevant to the present generations. At the same time, there is an opportunity to help churches, Christian organizations, and others in the voluntary sector use technical equipment more professionally. Many of these organizations are investing significant sums in laptops, tablets, digital projectors, editing software, and recording equipment; however, they require the creative and technical skills to maximize the use of the technology.

This is an opportunity for Christians to grasp the missional initiative by creating informal collaborative networks of creatives across the globe to shape church content, turning flavor of the month into a staple diet. The current situation may well have created an appetite for creative, innovative, and resourceful ministry.

**The Very Rev'd Albert Bogle** is a Church of Scotland Minister in Bo'ness, Scotland, and a former Moderator of the Church of Scotland from 2012-2013. He started a weekly "Sanctuary First" podcast in 2017 which has a global audience and offers live online worship experiences on Sundays.

## Connection Trumps Technology

Arni Svanur Danielsson



*A church that emphasizes connection and engagement in face-to-face worship services already has in its hands the key ingredient for online worship. At heart, face-to-face and online worship are about bringing people together, engagement and connection.*

### Introduction

In March 2010, one of the youth organizations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Iceland (ELCI) organized a multimedia worship service in Neskirkja, Reykjavík. The service was called *Bænarý* – a play on the English word binary and the Icelandic word *bæn*, which means prayer. The sermon was delivered via Skype by an Icelandic pastor who was working in Norway.

The worship service was intended to be interactive. The congregation had been asked to bring their cellphones to church and keep the sound on. During the worship service, they received text messages. You could hear gospel “pings” across the aisles and see screens lighting up faces. The youth were invited to reply with prayers via text messaging. Some remarked this was innovative and empowering and made them feel more connected to what was happening.

### When the Churches Went Live

Fast forward a decade. In late February, we read news of churches in Asia that were unable to gather together face to face and had moved towards online worship. "A few churches canceled Sunday services on 9 February, more joined them on 16 February, and still more on 23 February," wrote Leon Chau, General Secretary of the Chinese Rhenish Church Hong

Kong Synod, in a blog post on the Lutheran World Federation website. "Most kinds of pastoring and fellowship, including Sunday worship, can only be done via internet or telephone" (Chau, 2020). In March, restrictive measures to contain the spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) were being introduced in many countries in Europe and soon after that across other continents.

In Geneva, Switzerland, where I live, this took the form of a ban on gatherings of more than five people. Our local church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Geneva, quickly arranged for Sunday worship online. The same thing, of course, has been happening in churches all over the world. The first service of our church in Geneva was streamed live from the church building. There were five people present, as stipulated by the rules. They took turns leading. The congregation joined online and offered comments, prayers, and thanks. This was quite similar to the 2010 service in Iceland. We used new technology to do something similar.

The following week, the worship leaders began experimenting. Over the coming weeks, we would participate in services that, while led by the five gathered in the church building, included active participation of members of the congregation. The congregation was invited into worship from their homes. They read scripture, prayed, and created works of art.

The church was extended from the physical space of the building and the official leaders to our homes, which empowered members of the congregation in significant roles. Many had a chance to be active in leading the liturgy (worship). Those who were not leading or reading still felt represented and could continue to engage through comments and connections. This was something new and different. Online worship was fully

participatory, even though it did not include the sacrament of Holy Communion.

### **Principles**

From a communications perspective, the same principles apply when you communicate face to face and online. You need to 1) know your audience, 2) know your medium or "know your space," 3) know your message, and 4) engage and empower your audience to, 5) nurture a connection. Most worship leaders are familiar with and are probably entirely secure with their audience and their message. They might be less confident with the medium and methods of being engaging in the online space. Here church leaders might take a page out of the playbooks of YouTubers, gamers who livestream, or influencers on platforms like Instagram.

A good lesson highlighting this can be found in a recent conversation between photographer and YouTuber Tyler Stalman and video production specialist Alex Lindsay. Lindsay said online meetings like Google Hangouts can feel "more intimate than many roundtables [...] Because they're looking at me the whole time, there is a straight-on shot looking straight at me the whole time. That is a really powerful format." He adds on live events: "the energy you're now going to feel is the energy that's going to come from comments, from people you're bringing in" (Stalman, 2020). For me, the example from the Geneva church is highlighting the same strength of online engagement.

### **Conclusion**

Maybe we will remember the first half of 2020 as a time when the churches went "live." Looking ahead, I see a period of experimentation, which will be less about technology and more about connection and new ways of gathering as churches. A decade from now, we will hopefully remember this exceptional time as a time of learning, not just

## *The Distanced Church*

about online worship, but also about worship face to face, in the same space.

The key questions churches are faced with at this juncture are not how they can become experts at streaming video over the internet, nor are they about how many cameras will be needed, or what kind of microphones, lights or video mixers. Instead, on a fundamental level, the question is about the use of a new medium and how it can nurture and strengthen the connection with and between the members of a faith community or parish. It is about how this medium can facilitate participation that empowers a faith community to witness rather than merely watch a worship service.

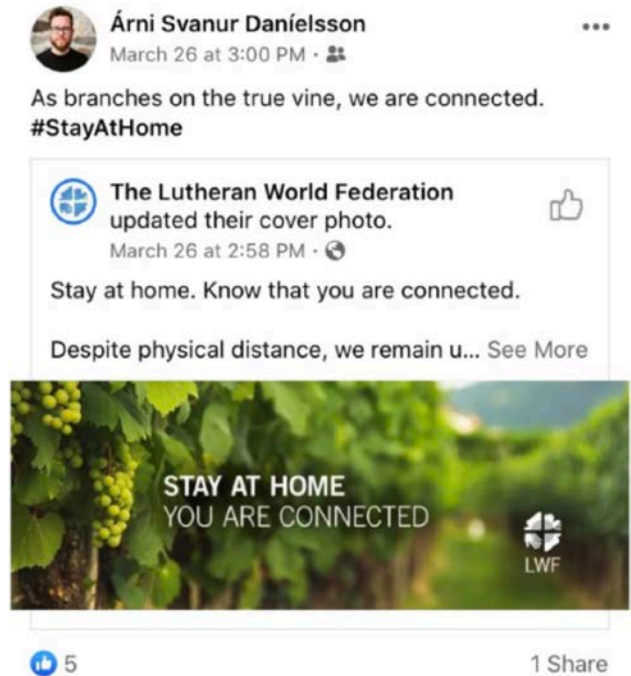
If we pursue this possibility, getting to know our medium along the way, it can profoundly affect the connection we have to one other, and by virtue of that connection, make our worship services, both face to face and online, a more participatory and richer experience for all.

**Arni Svanur Danielsson** is Head of Communication for the Lutheran World Federation, a communion of 148 churches in the Lutheran tradition. He was ordained as an online pastor for the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Iceland in 2008. He has researched, taught and lectured on communication, film, and religion. <https://arnisvanur.is>.

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**God Equips the Called**

Aneya Elbert

*In unprecedented times, we rise to the occasion because of our sense of community, knowing that no plan is perfect, there will always be challenges, a small team who works together can accomplish great things, and finally, that working for a church comes with generous grace.*

Under normal circumstances, there are many challenges in moving a medium-sized Episcopal church, such as the one I work for, to an online status for worship and spiritual formation. Yet my recent experience in which I was asked to help do this was not under normal circumstances. This experience has been filled with mistakes and lessons. I would like to document two components which weighed heavily on my experience and the strategies our church put into place. These include having a small church staff and trying to educate a congregation quickly about new technology.

Ideally, the process to move a church to an online status would include time for research, a budget, creating a plan to execute the project, and finally, taking it live. Now, take the idea of moving a church to an online status and intensify the need for partial completion in twenty-four hours. In addition to a quick turnaround, we add a unique challenge that would only happen during a global pandemic. The entire staff, including the two priests, were quarantined for fourteen days at the onset because of exposure to someone who tested positive for COVID-19.

In a medium-sized church such as ours, the staff is small and everyone wears different hats based on needs, not skills. Part of my role as

Ministries Coordinator includes communication. I was given this responsibility because of a former twenty-year career in technology. The quote by author Rick Yancey is one that seems to fit when we discuss a church staff: "God doesn't call the equipped. God equips the called. And you have been called" (Yancey, 2013). Each person learns new things when filling a role on a small church staff. The opportunity to learn increases, especially during a time of crisis.

While returning from a spiritual pilgrimage to Scotland, the priest-in-charge and I began planning the first Sunday of online worship. I arrived that first Sunday morning with only a few hours of sleep and jet lagged. We put into place the plan with two smartphones and two tripods. This would allow us to record the worship service and to livestream on Facebook. In theory, this plan was quick, easy, and inexpensive to execute. Everything should have worked smoothly. Nevertheless, keep in mind, technology rarely runs smoothly.

The Facebook Live stream quit just before the conclusion of the service. As you can imagine, we quickly scrambled to get back online. First lesson learned: Phone calls interrupt live stream. The second part of our day was set aside to edit the video and upload it to YouTube. On a normal day, I might lament over how long it was taking for my file to upload — perhaps 5-10 minutes. This was not a normal day. Whether it was my computer or my internet service provider, the upload took several hours. The second lesson learned: Hardwire the computer into the router.

Within a couple of days of that first service, the entire staff was quarantined for 14 days. However, it was paramount that nothing stopped moving forward and that the congregation did not feel the effects of this quarantine. Church would go on and things

would continue. I took on the majority of the backend work for moving the church to a full online status. I quickly learned through trial and error new things, tapped into some new creativity, and realized that working in pajamas is kind of nice. In one conversation with a colleague from another church, we discussed how it seemed all churches were doing more online than pre-COVID-19. In addition to regular worship and formation, we were now offering Morning Prayer and Compline Monday through Friday; social media posts increased, our website and mobile app were updated daily, we created and curated digital content, and recorded/edited videos that include messages from the rector, music, and children's chapel.

All of this is happening to ensure the support and retention of the congregation. After all, what is a church without a congregation? A traditional church model supports a congregation described as cradle to grave. There is a generation of people who have sat inside the church, on the same pew, most of their adult lives. The older adult congregation are the ones who are most vulnerable and isolated; they are also the ones who need extra help with technology. While normal technology glitches can be frustrating, there is an added stress with an older adult who is learning new technology and experiencing glitches, some normal glitches and some glitches that are happening because we have pushed the technology beyond normal use. Naturally, there is an opportunity for increased anxiety and a feeling of being a failure. We have to remember that while many of us have been using online platforms for years, there is a large group of people who have not. These are the people who I believe are yearning for this type of connection most during a time of crisis.

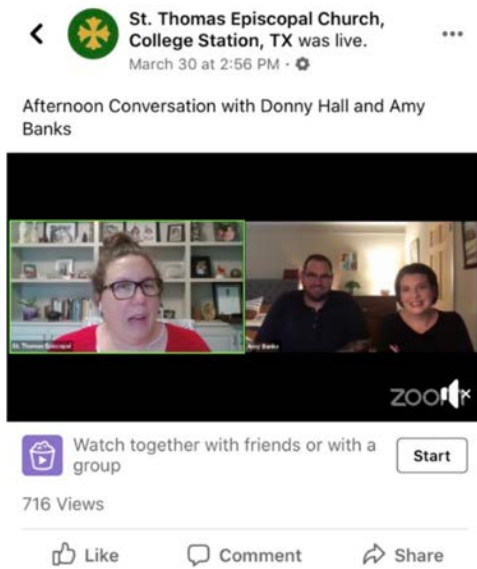
I walk away from these past three weeks with a reminder that no plan is perfect, there will

always be challenges, a small team who works together can accomplish great things, and finally, that working for a church comes with generous grace. These are a few of the big lessons that were learned as we continue to discern what "church" looks like beyond COVID-19. Going forward, we have created online platforms that will hopefully continue, and some will still need to be adjusted. This means that we can continue to provide worship and formation for the congregation outside of the traditional church building. In the end, it comes down to relationships and connections. There is a gift in this experience. We have been allowed to reconnect with people who have moved away. Many have felt encouraged to invite new people to participate online. This is a gift that can be celebrated by the entire community.

**Aneya Elbert** is Ministries Coordinator with St. Thomas Episcopal Church in College Station, Texas. She transitioned out of her 20-year career in technology to her current work in Christian formation and church communication. Aneya is also a trained Spiritual Director, certified by the Episcopal Diocese of Texas, with 11 years of practice in spiritual direction and formation.

**Source**

Yancey, R. (2013). *The 5<sup>th</sup> wave*. New York, NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons.



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### **The Unspectacular Pastor: Live and In Person**

Steve Evoy

*Trying to produce the “best” services is not the best way to move your ministries online.*

The day after Governor Whitmer closed all K-12 schools in Michigan, my Superintendent convened a Zoom meeting with a representative group of pastors from across our conference. We quickly reached consensus that it was in the best interest of our congregations to cancel all in-person services, meetings, and activities immediately. The conversation then shifted to the best way for our churches to adapt from on-site to online ministry. In this anecdotal essay, I will summarize that discussion to emphasize the conclusion we reached: *Trying to produce the “best” streaming services is not the best way for pastors to move their ministries online.*

There are 39 churches in the East Michigan Conference of the Free Methodist Church. Our largest churches are in (or near) the bigger cities, all of which are in the southern half of our conference. In the north, the towns (and their churches) are smaller and more separated. I pastor the northernmost church in our conference, in the rural community of Wolverine. Residential population within the village limits is less than 2,000. I maintain a Facebook page and a basic website for our church. Prior to the coronavirus pandemic, I'd never attempted a live broadcast. My role in the Zoom conference was to represent pastors serving small churches in rural areas who were living in the digital dark ages.

After our Superintendent initiated a discussion about moving to an online format, the pastors of our larger churches were the first to speak.



Several of them were already livestreaming their services, embedding content directly into their websites. There was some crosstalk between these leaders as they described how simple it would be for worship teams and pastors to continue hosting regular services in empty sanctuaries. They were ready to roll.

Next to speak were pastors of medium-sized churches who had been exploring options of expanding their ministries online but had little or no experience. Some had equipment but weren't sure how to use it. Others had the resources to purchase equipment and were planning to do so immediately. Leaders from larger churches were quick to offer their expertise. Last to speak were pastors like myself, who didn't have the equipment, resources, or confidence to launch online worship services. Our Superintendent noted that at least twenty-five percent of our churches might be in this category. We became the focus of the conversation. What could we do? What could be done for us?

Someone suggested that smaller, offline churches be given a list of links to larger churches who were positioned to provide high-quality online worship services. We could simply post an announcement on Facebook explaining that our services were cancelled and include a set of links to FM churches in our conference with online worship options.

Someone else suggested that we identify our *best* equipped church and use it as a location from which we could present and broadcast a single online worship service for *all* other churches in our conference. This idea gained traction quickly, and we began brainstorming. One pastor suggested scheduling worship teams and pastors from various congregations to be featured on specific Sundays so that there was reasonable representation from a variety of our churches. We agreed that we had an

excellent talent pool in the combined membership of our conference churches. As the leaders from our largest churches began volunteering their facilities as the best locations for this purpose, I wondered how that determination would be made. I also wondered if I might be invited to have a role in one of these unique and widely viewed services.

"May I offer a personal opinion?" The question was raised by a pastor in one of our larger churches, a woman I've known and respected for many years. I can't quote her comments verbatim, but her remarks were so pertinent and profound that I haven't forgotten her main points. My best paraphrase of her opinion is, "I'm thinking about the people in my congregation. They were anxious *before* they learned that our schools are closing. When they hear that we've agreed to cancel our church services, they'll be even more frightened and upset. They'll be disappointed that they can't gather in the place where they experience God's loving presence together. I don't believe that their primary need will be the highest quality online production we can offer. They won't need our most talented musicians or engaging speakers. They won't need HD resolution or professional editing. I believe that they will be longing for something familiar, something that feels as normal as possible. I believe that my people will need to see myself and a few other familiar faces speaking to them from within our own building. It's the closest thing we can offer to the experience they're going to miss so deeply."

Her words spoke to my heart. They changed the direction of the Zoom conversation. It didn't take long for us to agree that a single service featuring conference all-star worship leaders and preachers was *not* the best way forward. Larger churches would make their content available to smaller churches, should they choose to point their congregations to

alternative online worship options. But it was agreed that all our pastors had the potential to address their own congregations, directly and personally, using the basic equipment of a smartphone and Facebook app. Instruction and training would be made available – in person or online – for those who needed to develop entry-level skills for online interaction.

The following Sunday, I uploaded a simple address to our congregation. I read from the Scriptures, led a pastoral prayer, and shared a few reflections on the week’s Gospel reading. Over the following days, I began posting “fireside chats,” one-take monologues in which I spoke from my heart to our congregation and community. Sometimes I read from my journal, other times I offer commentary on a Lenten devotional guide that we’ve been following.

The feedback from these posts has been unanimously positive and very encouraging. In addition to online engagement, I’m trying to connect with every household in our congregation on a weekly basis. (This is possible since we have less than 100 members.) The most frequent comment I receive during these calls is, “Thank you for those ‘fireside chats.’ They are such a blessing. It’s so good to see your face and hear your voice. It provides a sense of normalcy for us during this very unusual time.” I am humbled by their appreciation, especially since I’m often horrified by my uploads. I must be insecure; I really don’t like watching myself online.

I’m grateful for the insightful comments of my fellow pastor who shared her heart during that Zoom conference. Her wisdom has been proven right in my context and others. I continue to speak to my people, from my heart, as frequently and informally as possible. When one of our members died, many were upset that we couldn’t organize a funeral or memorial luncheon. I uploaded a video of myself, singing

a song as a tribute. God is using these improvised efforts to bless members of my church and community. It’s one way we’re staying spiritually connected during this season of social isolation.

**Pastor Steve Evoy** has served in the Free Methodist Church for 25 years. He lives in Wolverine, Michigan, where he works as a full-time pastor and part-time substitute teacher. He’s also a full-time student, on track to receive an MA in Education from Spring Arbor University in May 2020.



**The Challenges of Online in Indian Country and Rural America**

John Floberg

*Virtual gatherings and worship may not be the best-done video a person will ever watch, but their interest will keep them at the screen to see and to hear what it is that is going on there.*

**Challenges for Anglicans Going Online**

Anglican theology bases itself as “incarnational.” That is to say that “God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten son — in the flesh — into the world.” While there are values that give direction to the moral life, we do not place our emphasis there for our common life. Our emphasis is that, as God’s Son came into the world, so God’s Spirit continues that embodiment through the church, God’s people. That while Jesus spoke of himself as God incarnate, the Apostle Paul also speaks of the members of the church being the temple of God’s Spirit — not individually comprehensive, but as a body.

Going online is something that at first feels like being disembodied. We are not physically present to others. That means that we are not responding to one another in a myriad of ways through which human beings communicate. In fact, communication online becomes much more of a one-way streaming that places the officiant of the services as the performer and those joining online as an audience.

Practically speaking, going online leaves out some of our members. Those who cannot afford computers, smart TVs, smart phones, and/or reliable internet are difficult to reach. Those who, for whatever reason, will not subscribe to things like Facebook, even if they

have the technology available to them are another limiting factor. While those insights are true, it is also true that because of technology and some people's affinity to it (younger people?), we gain members to our congregation.

**In-Person versus Online Communication**

In-person communication has the ability to adjust for the communication that is taking place in the gathering. The pause in speaking or the direction of a look towards people during a reading or a sermon helps to “close the loop” in communication. Electronic and virtual means are void of that aspect of communication. If this “in-person” aspect of communication is beneficial, perhaps even necessary, how can we form an active congregation around a shared online experience. It raises the question for me about how well we can communicate sacramentally in a virtual setting.

The Sanctus Bell would ring in a congregation where a priest was saying their prayers in Latin, in order for the congregation to be aware of the sanctity of the moment at hand. When gathering virtually, how is it that we can keep the attention of the faithful? One of our greatest challenges, it seems, is that we are using a medium that also displays some of the best movies ever produced. People are used to watching a screen with wonderful graphics, terrific sound, and a great storyline that is reinforced by the music of an orchestra.

What we have observed is that of the number of people that “view” our online service, a significant percentage aren’t watching the whole thing—although, that doesn’t discourage me from making use of this means of gathering as best we can. It does indicate that I need to be careful of what I expect of the congregation that does tune in. I don’t have the ability to catch up with them at Coffee Hour in the same way that I do at church.

## *The Distanced Church*

This may be different on a Zoom call than it is on Facebook Live. A Zoom call is typically a group of people that are invited to the meeting/gathering, and they have a way to respond and to participate. A person on the Zoom call can be asked to lead Prayers of the People or read a lesson. The acolytes in the group could even light and extinguish candles that are viewed by others from the camera on their device. A Zoom call isn't nearly as accessible for the casual visitor to join with the others.

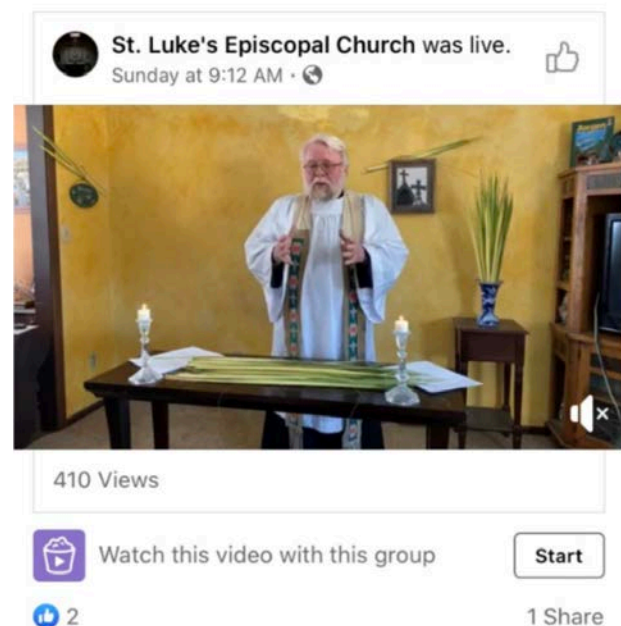
It is that very concern that would lead me away from "Celebrating the Eucharist" in the casual setting of Facebook Live where people come and go at will and have little interaction with the congregation and its celebrant. And it is that engagement of a Zoom call that may, in time and after reflection with others, lead me to consider a virtual Eucharist. I am in no way saying that I am at that place now, but I don't feel that I am at an extreme place of fasting from the Eucharist at this time either.

### **Being the Church in Quarantine**

In the past four weeks, I have been receiving requests to become "friends" on Facebook daily. The people asking to become my friend know that I am a priest in the Episcopal Church. They know that they are going to expose their posts to me and that they are going to follow my posts and invitations as well. While certain aspects of church life are in a state of suspension, other parts that engage people who haven't been darkening our doors are opening up. Through a Plexiglas shield at a six-foot distance and with a face mask on, a young store manager asked me today for my email so that he could get in contact with me so that I could email him video copies of our services these past few weeks. That is a doorway that opened on account of how we are having to do church. It may not be the best-done video he

will ever watch — but his interest will keep him at the screen to see and to hear what it is that is going on there.

**Rev Dr John Floberg** has been serving on Standing Rock as an Episcopal priest since July 1991. Initially, he served in Ft. Yates and Cannon Ball. Currently, he is based at Standing Rock in Sioux County (1,128 square miles, with a population of nearly 4,500 people), where the Episcopal Church makes up more than 15% of the population.



**Facilitating Deep Friendships Digitally when Analog Acquaintances Are Gone**

*In the time of COVID-19, the church is uniquely positioned to facilitate people digitally rediscovering the importance of having deep relationships, since the acquaintances they used to see each day are gone.*

Zach W Lambert

We have been livestreaming our Sunday Gatherings since the debut of Facebook Live in April of 2016, just two months after our church launched. It started with my cell phone clipped into a mini-tripod on a chair in the front row — no one sits on the front row in church, so we knew it wouldn't be disturbed. Before COVID-19 shut down our in-person gatherings, we had evolved to multiple cameras, audio piped in from a unique mix on our soundboard, special hardware and software, and a laptop manned by a volunteer dedicated only to livestreaming.

For a church that meets in a middle school, we were doing it pretty well. But still, the engagement during the actual livestream was minimal — usually only one or two comments by the same one or two people. That all changed when Coronavirus hit. We transformed our office into a studio and began livestreaming exclusively weekly.

**Virtual Hugs**

The first Sunday, we had over 200 comments during the livestream. The second Sunday, over 400 comments. The majority of those 600 comments had nothing to do with the music, the message, the announcements, or any other content coming through the screen. People were talking to each other; they were greeting

each other by name and checking on each other.

“Hi fam ”

“Buenos días!”

“Sending virtual hugs to you.”

“How's that sweet little boy doing?”

“Can't wait to hang out with you again when this is all over!!!”

“Congratulations to the newlyweds”

“How's the pregnancy going? How are you feeling?”

“Has your job been affected?”

“Can we send you guys dinner this week?”

They were even typing in greetings from their kids to other kids whose parents were on the chat. I was stunned.

**Rediscovering Relationship**

This posture carried forward into the weekly interaction on our social media platforms and into our small groups, too. We moved all of our small groups to Zoom so that we could still have good conversation and see each other's faces at the same time. There were varied predictions from our staff as to the level of engagement that we would see, so when we had our first group leader gathering we were anxious to hear how the first few weeks of digital groups had gone.

We learned that every single one of our groups reported higher attendance and increased engagement than was happening before COVID-19. More than half of the groups reported that not a single group member had been absent in the three weeks since moving to Zoom. I was stunned again.

We've also seen new people jumping into groups during this time. In my group alone, we've had five new adults join in the last three weeks. Rather than hurting our small groups, social distancing seems to be revitalizing them.

### **Acquaintances Exposed**

These trends can be rightly attributed to many different factors: cleared schedules, boredom, etc. But I believe it's something more profound than that. I believe, in the age of social distancing, folks are becoming more aware of their need for deep friendship. In the United States, where I live, we are constantly surrounded by people we know. Whether it's at our jobs, church, the gym, our kids' soccer practice, or a myriad of other places, many of us are in perpetual dialogue with people. But if we look deeper, we begin to realize that the dialogue is mostly small talk and the people are mostly acquaintances.

For many of us, the constant bombardment of small talk with acquaintances placates our intrinsic, God-given need for deep friendship. We have many acquaintances, so there seems to be no need for friends. We spend hours in small talk, so there seems to be no need for deep connection and conversation. But then came Coronavirus. In a matter of days, most of the country went from days filled with small talk with acquaintances to social distancing and isolation.

The figurative masks we used to wear have been replaced by literal masks separating us from our surface-level relationships. The shallow connections which previously pacified us have now been exposed for what they really were all along: counterfeit.

And now, in our current cultural moment, this truth is in our faces more clearly than ever before: We need each other. We need deep friendships.

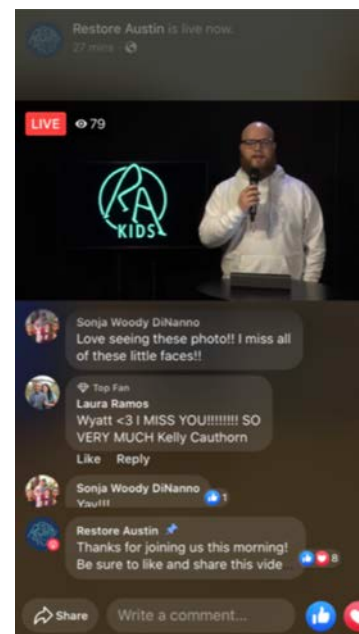
### **Connection over Content**

As almost every church in America makes the move to digital gatherings, we must do so with that truth in mind. Our content is important, but our connection is imperative. We must

intentionally create spaces where deep friendship can blossom. The internet is a big place and I am far from the best teacher on it. I believe our worship through music is amazing, but it isn't unique. This is true for all of us. No matter how great we are, there will always be someone who has better and more compelling content than we do. But there is one thing each of us can offer that no one else can: connection with our unique church family.

The need for deep friendship isn't any greater than it's ever been, but most people's lack of it has been exposed like never before. Right now, the church is uniquely positioned to step into that gap digitally and then carry the torch forward long after social distancing is behind us.

**Zach Lambert** is the Lead Pastor and founder of Restore Austin, a church in urban Austin, Texas. He holds a Masters of Theology from Dallas Seminary and serves on the boards of Restore Houston, Louder than Silence (a non-profit for survivors of sexual violence), and the Austin Church Planting Network.



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***Live-streams in the Digital Desert: Reflections on Parish Transitions into the Digital Age***

Joanne Mercer

*This essay provides readers with some questions to consider as they shape their online presence. Overall, I suggest that pastors need to think carefully before they stream.*

The Church has talked about its need to transform for a very long time. There has been report after report about the “changing landscape,” the “shifting demographics,” and our “new reality.” We have talked, studied, and written, but few have dared to take the leap into new models of “doing church.” Now, we are all pushed. No more time for long-term planning or for studies. Now, we are in the midst of a crisis and a scale of change that no one could have predicted. Now, we must transform or we will show ourselves to be as completely irrelevant as some have claimed.

Yet, while we are being pushed rapidly into transformation, we need to be prayerful and mindful. The choices we make now, in the pressure of COVID-19, will shape us for many years to come. It is important that we be careful not to be just reactive, responding in panic to the massive need before us. It is imperative that we take some time to think about what is needed and what can be sustained. So many have taken their ministries “digital” in the last few weeks out of necessity and with a sense of urgency, but with little thought about the long-term ramifications of their decisions. I have heard people speak of doing this online ministry as a stop-gap measure to fill the immediate need until things get back to “normal.” That is not going to be possible, since nothing will be exactly as it was

before. Some of what we are doing now will need to continue, as it is reaching people on the edges of our communities. So it is time to stop and think about what you are doing and what you will be doing moving forward.

**Why?**

Why do you want/need to do this? Why do you think it is necessary? If you are deciding to take your ministry online, why? Because everyone else is doing it? Because we can’t meet in person? Because you feel powerless and need to do something? Take some time to stop and consider why you are engaging in online ministry. I know in talking to my colleagues, there are many who feel pressured to offer things online. Some feel overwhelmed, as they do not use online technology on a regular basis. Some are even questioning their vocation, as this immediate shift to online ministry has left them feeling inept. Others are focused on the number of plays and views and are excited to reach far beyond their parish, when in fact very few members of their parish are actually being reached.

The question of why brings us to an understanding of our own vocation. The question of why we do ministry online is rooted in the question of why we answered “yes” to the call to ministry in the first place. And that may be different for each of us. But each of us have felt a call to respond to God by ministering to others using the gifts God has given and responding to the needs of the particular community we serve. So before you go any further, please take some time to reconnect to your call and consider the ministry you do and why you think going online is going to help you do that.

**Who?**

Who are you serving? We all know the importance of demographics. You need to know who is in your community. What are their

age ranges? What online platforms do they use? Is the online ministry you are doing/planning focused on your current members, or is it outreach? These are important questions to consider. And you may be surprised. I have parishioners in their 80s who are quite active online and those in their 50s who choose not to have a computer at home. We have had a parish Facebook page for a number of years. But when I went to set up small groups on Facebook, I realized that many of my parishioners were not actually members of our page. Here I was sending out information, not realizing that they were not following the page and so not always getting the information. I was reaching a lot more people than were in my parish, but I was not actually reaching my parishioners as I had falsely assumed. Knowing who you want to reach will help you choose a technology platform — and remember that the phone is a technology too!

### **What?**

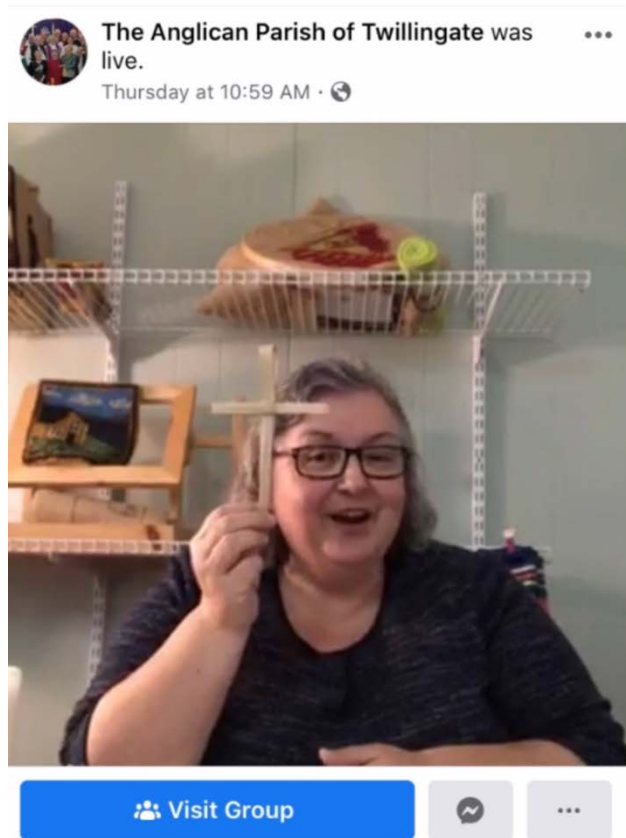
Once you figure out who you want to reach and their use of technology, you still need to figure out what you are going to do with that information. What technology or program can you use to achieve your ministry “whys?” And that may be as low-tech as deciding to call all of your parishioners to talk with them and pray with them. If that is what they need and what you are gifted to do, and it fits into your vision of your vocation, then do that. You don’t have to do what your fellow pastors are doing. There is plenty of variety available online and folks can find what they need. I suggest that you play to your strengths, to the gifts that God has given you. That may be an online concert, or it may be an audio service, or it may be a video or a livestream. What you do is not only guided by the needs you have identified, but also by your skill set and the skill set of your wider community. If you feel called to an online ministry beyond your skill set, then ask for help.

There may be someone in your community who can help you. You do not have to do this on your own.

For me, the question of who I can include was a major factor in choosing what platform to use. I serve in a very rural area with folks spread out over three islands, and I wanted to include someone from every congregation in our online worship. Given my technical skills, the skills of my parishioners, and the slow speed of the internet in those communities, I decided on audio. It fit into my vision of ministry that includes many voices, it fit into my demographic of folks with and without access to the internet (as audio is easily played over the telephone), and it was within my skill set. That does not mean that once you make a decision on a platform that it is fixed that you can breathe and just do what you would normally do. You can’t simply transfer what you do offline to online. Online platforms can bring unique opportunities for collaboration and inclusion. We have been able to include folks connected to our parish in our worship leadership, even though they live far away from us. We are listening and adapting as we go to meet the needs of our community. Remember: Ministry is never static. Also remember that you have something unique to offer; your voice and your presence are a gift to your community, however you may choose to share them.

**The Rev’d Dr. Joanne Mercer** is an Anglican priest, theologian, and theological educator from Central Newfoundland, Canada. Her research interests include (but are not limited to) theology and communication (media, film, internet), models of theological education, and contemporary expressions of “church.”





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**Throughout the World the Holy Church  
Acclaims You**

Rodger Patience

*While limits on gathering in person have focused our attention more narrowly on habits of daily prayer at home, simple social media tools have broadened our reach to share the rich tradition of Christian worship in Oneida.*

Church of the Holy Apostles, The Oneida Mission, is about 300 years old. It was founded in New York State in 1702 and moved to Wisconsin in 1822. The first party of Oneidas who made the trip west were the Episcopalians. Formed by the High Church practices of the Diocese of New York, nourished by the Anglo-Catholic worship of the early bishops of Fond du Lac, and cared for over the last 200 years by missionary and diocesan clergy, two Oneida priests, two Oneida deacons, and two orders of Episcopal nuns, the congregation today numbers about 50 worshippers on a Sunday. However, Holy Apostles is connected to more than half of the families in the larger Oneida community who would consider themselves “members” of the parish. We perform between one-third and one-half of Oneida funerals each year, regularly filling the 134-year-old “Stone Church,” and ours is the largest cemetery within the reservation.

Like the average Episcopal congregation, we are a fairly elderly group whose life revolves around gathering for worship and Sunday morning education, enjoying breakfasts after church two Sundays a month, and hosting Friday fish fry dinners during Lent. Many parishioners also socialize each week at Elder Meals at the nursing home.

Because of the COVID-19 “safer at home” orders from the Governor of Wisconsin and the tribal leadership of the Oneida Nation (and following guidance from the Bishop of Fond du Lac limiting celebration of the Holy Eucharist to the Cathedral of the Diocese), we are no longer able to gather in person for Sunday worship. We also had to cancel the Lenten Friday fish fry dinners, which are not only a significant fundraiser for the parish, but more importantly, a time of fellowship for families from all over the Oneida community. Even at the nursing home, elders now no longer take meals together in the dining room.

I’m a bivocational priest and a Gen X digital native used to working from a laptop and iPhone wherever my business travel takes me, so when the “safer at home” orders took effect, I simply began recording daily Morning Prayer videos from home to share on the church’s Facebook page ([www.facebook.com/holyapostlesoneida](http://www.facebook.com/holyapostlesoneida)) and my own profile ([www.facebook.com/rodgerpatience](http://www.facebook.com/rodgerpatience)). With advice from communications professionals at the national Episcopal Church offices, I invested in a tripod and directional microphone for my iPhone to improve video quality (just over \$100).

Over the first couple of weeks, we have reached between 50 and 250 people each day, and we have had up to 1,000 views for the Sunday worship videos that we boosted through Facebook to people within 10 miles of the church. Though few of those viewers are actually Holy Apostles parishioners, there are some encouraging signs among our own. One parishioner who works as a long-distance trucker actually joined Facebook for the first time in order to follow our page, and he has said the videos are just what he needed while he’s on the road. Another parishioner, an elder who attends with her granddaughter, came to

pick up palms and a prayer book because she saw the Palm Sunday worship video.

In addition to daily Morning Prayer and Sunday worship videos, we have also created a video of the Lenten Stations of the Cross and will be filming a “Holy Hour” video for personal devotions on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday using resources from Forward Movement ([www.forwardmovement.com](http://www.forwardmovement.com)). For Easter Day, we will film two men of the parish singing the canticle *Te Deum* in the Oneida language, which may be the signature practice at Holy Apostles. It is sung at Easter, on Christmas Eve, and whenever the bishop visits the parish. It has been sung at every ordination of a bishop for the diocese of Fond du Lac.

My pastoral focus in this time of pandemic, beyond being available by phone for parish business, pastoral care, and the Sacrament of Reconciliation, has been to encourage parishioners in their private prayer lives. I have urged them to take home a *Book of Common Prayer* with simple guides I have created over the years for those learning to pray the Daily Office (Morning and Evening Prayer) at home. I have also shared my five-part YouTube series called “Daily Office Basics” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iLwNrZ8ODc>) with clergy colleagues and lay people who are facing the same isolation from their usual Sunday worship as my parishioners are.

The most frustrating communication challenge we have faced while we are separated is that nearly a third of the phone numbers in our parish directory are disconnected or out of service. There’s a wonderful benefit for elders in the Oneida Nation that means they can get a cell phone anytime they need one. But that also means their numbers change every time they lose their phone.

## *The Distanced Church*

On the positive side, however, our deacon has forged a new connection with a young man on staff at the nursing home who will make our Facebook videos available to residents without computer access. We also plan to try using Zoom for Sunday morning Bible study. We will once again be participating in the Good Book Club ([www.goodbookclub.org](http://www.goodbookclub.org)), where Episcopalians will read the Gospel of Matthew together during the Easter Season. Parishioners have enjoyed these Good Book Club studies twice before, and some of the elders are surprisingly eager to give Zoom a try.

While limits on gathering in person (or what Choctaw Episcopal bishop Steven Charleston calls “sheltering in faith”) have focused our attention more narrowly on habits of daily prayer at home, simple social media tools like Facebook have broadened our reach to share the rich tradition of Christian and Episcopal worship in Oneida. I believe we will continue to offer many of these simple social media resources, even when we once more return to our familiar pews in the Stone Church in the center of Oneida.

**Rodger Patience** is a Director and Faculty Member at EAB ([www.eab.com](http://www.eab.com)), working with higher education partners on student success and academic technologies. For 25 years, he has also been a bivocational minister in the Episcopal Church, and currently is vicar at Church of the Holy Apostles on the Oneida Indian Reservation near Green Bay, Wisconsin, the oldest Native American ministry in the Episcopal Church.



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### **The Charism of Zoom Church**

Nandra Perry

*Digital platforms can help declining rural churches grow and nurture their congregations.*

This past Sunday was Palm Sunday. Under normal circumstances, it's a big Sunday for St. Philip's, the rural parish where I serve as a non-stipendiary priest. Like most Episcopal churches, we have celebrated this Sunday the same way: a boisterous Palm procession, favorite hymns sung only this time of year, and a dramatic reading of the Passion.

But this Palm Sunday was obviously different. Here in the Diocese of Texas, we have not been under "normal circumstances" for four weeks now. Since Friday, March 13<sup>th</sup> — when I got the text from our bishop that we would be closing our doors for public worship starting immediately — the people of St. Philip's have not been gathering in our beautiful old sanctuary. We have been gathering via Zoom: not just for worship, but also for business, daily prayer, and some much-needed fun.

Had last Sunday been Zoom Sunday #1, I would have been despairing. What is Palm Sunday, after all, without a procession (or palms, for that matter)?! How could we possibly move into the dark drama of Holy Week without the spiritual nourishment of the Eucharist? I can't say I'm not still grieving those losses. But Palm Sunday found me in a much more joyful mood about worshipping virtually than I would have ever anticipated was possible even just a few weeks prior.

The Sunday before (Zoom Sunday #3), we had decided that since we could not process around our church on Palm Sunday, we would each be

responsible for decking out our individual Zoom squares in honor of Jesus's entry into our homes. My plan had been to use a virtual background, not least because I had a lot of other tasks coming up in the following week. That is how it happened that I found myself in a panic less than an hour before the service, not having realized until just that moment that none of our family laptops supported virtual backgrounds. "I got this," said my husband. As I put the finishing touches on my sermon, he and our daughter gleefully ransacked our linen closet.

Go-time found me seated in front of a red(ish) tablecloth festooned with checkered red napkins. I was wearing my cassock and surplice, but over jeans and in bare feet and with a red winter scarf around my neck in lieu of a stole. Ruby and Britt had fashioned a bandana backdrop for themselves and we were all holding "palms" from different shrubs around our home. As parishioners logged on one by one, we began to laugh at each other's improvisations. One was wearing a fun red hat. Another (a visitor joining us from the Midwest) was wielding a golf club for a palm. One young family included stuffed animals in their procession. Almost every square included a pet or two. As our pianist struck up "All Glory Laud and Honor" on her electric keyboard, we muted our mics, waved our palms, and sang along from home.

As much as I hope Palm Sunday 2021 looks more like Palm Sunday 2019 for St. Philip's, Palm Sunday 2020 exemplifies all the ways we have been changed forever — and largely for the better — by the experience of doing church digitally during this time of pandemic. That we have been able to change at all is the first (and happiest) surprise. Four weeks ago, I would have told you that our congregation was too old, too small, and too rural to benefit much from digital tools. I am a college professor

Monday-Friday and have long used Zoom professionally. However, pre-pandemic it would never have occurred to me to ask my parishioners to download and then master such “sophisticated” conferencing software. Imagine my surprise, when every single person in our congregation (many of them over 70) did just that in the space of a single weekend.

That our story is far from unique is the single best news I’ve heard about organized religion in 20 years. If even traditional communities like ours can adapt to sudden change, then the church is healthier and more resilient than we have believed. Now that we know this, perhaps we can stop wringing our hands about the declining numbers of people in our pews and simply get on with the business of becoming salt and light in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

At St. Philip’s, we’ve already begun having the conversation about what this might look like for us when things “go back to normal.” Zoom has increased our Sunday morning attendance by over 50% and also helped us succeed for the first time at offering midweek prayer, socials, and bible study. Like many small churches, we have struggled to offer these supplements to Sunday worship in our traditional space. It turns out that Zoom is a great equalizer. It allows older parishioners to avoid driving at night and requires a lower time commitment from younger ones. Perhaps most importantly, it makes church accessible to our parishioners with chronic illness and disabilities. Now that we all have it, we’ll keep using Zoom for midweek meetings and socials and also to include people in Sunday worship who cannot join us physically.

Zoom Church has also changed who counts as “us.” On the one hand, we have never been more rooted in our particular locality. On the other, we’ve been joined in worship by people from all over Texas and five other states. Many

of them are becoming part of our community. We are beginning to have conversations about how we might continue those relationships once churches are gathering physically again. It is hard to predict what that will look like, but I feel certain it will not look like our local church as usual.

As my opening anecdote about Palm Sunday exemplifies, playfulness is another important lesson we’ve learned from doing church digitally. Because our sanctuary does not have adequate bandwidth, live streaming worship was never an option for us. While I look forward to returning to our beautiful physical space, I think this season of doing without all the accoutrements of traditional Episcopal worship has taught our congregation something important about our essential identity. St. Philip’s is more than a historic sanctuary and great music. It is more than physical bread and a shared chalice. What we need most and do best is community. For us, what that means is common prayers, the Word preached, and the gift of being together, even (maybe especially) when we are far from camera perfect. Zoom church has reminded us that worship at its best is holy play. It has made us more adaptable, creative, and charitable. This is the charism the church will need for whatever is next.

**Nandra Perry** is a non-stipendiary priest serving St. Philip’s Episcopal Church in Hearne, Texas. She sees small churches and bi-vocational ministers as uniquely positioned to breathe life into struggling communities and is newly excited about the role of digital tools in supporting that effort.



Nandra Perry

March 22 at 9:48 AM · 🌐

Zoom Church clergy fashion, parts 1 and 2. Anybody out there is welcome to join us at 11am. Here's the link: <https://zoom.us/j/873624583>

If you want to follow along, download the worship guide from our webpage: <http://stphilips-hearne.org/>



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## Getting Back to Normal

Michael Piazza

*Is “getting back to normal” going to be a blessing or a curse for your church?*

People keep saying, “When things get back to normal,” which usually stirs one of two responses in me. I almost always want to say, “I hope life never returns to normal. Maybe we can be kinder and more compassionate, sensitive and empathetic when this pandemic-enforced isolation has ended. Maybe we will understand that the poor and marginalized in our society need and deserve the same health care as the rich.” That’s probably my pastoral and prophetic response.

In my capacity as a seminary professor teaching congregational renewal and as a consultant with mainline churches, my response is, “Normal is no more.” Oh, I suspect that in the immediate aftermath, we will return to our favorite restaurants, bars, and coffee shops, and people might even return to church. Our time at home, however, has been long enough for us to develop new habits and patterns.

For example, in New York City where my congregation is located, I suspect the restaurants will be packed as soon as we can get back to them. Like me, most folks are tired of cooking and eating at home. After a few weeks eating out with friends we haven’t seen, I suspect we soon will be inviting them over more often to experience our newfound recipes and cooking skills. Companies have discovered that their employees really can and will work from home, so expensive office space gradually will be eliminated as will the lunch time crowds of many eateries. Although there will be a rebound as we try to “return to

normal,” soon enough, every industry will recognize that this change is more enduring than the virus.

My seminary is evaluating my fall classes by how effectively they can be taught online. People have acquired new skills, and distance learning is making more sense, even to clergy. In our small, very urban church, our online spiritual formation classes have been much better attended than they ever were in person, and virtual worship attendance is quadruple what it had been in person. Members of the diaspora of our modern transience are worshipping once again and contributing from far-flung places. Young people from as far away as England are attending worship and then joining in the post-worship Zoom coffee hour. The congregation has assumed responsibility for pastoral care by calling and checking in on one another every week. Many members feel more cared for in this crisis than they ever did when things were “normal.”

Our congregation is fortunate that we already had begun to make the shift from an annual pledge campaign to a comprehensive plan to sign everyone up for recurring electronic giving. During this pandemic, the members who still pay their bills with checks have run out of stamps and been confined to their homes, so they, too, are having to figure out how to pay their bills electronically. Writing paper checks is the quaint, archaic practice of dinosaurs. Long before COVID-19, the only check many households still wrote was to the church. If we insist on “returning to normal,” our extinction will be greatly accelerated.

Unfortunately, when things “return to normal” churches and restaurants likely will breathe a sigh of relief and go right back to business as usual. They won’t even notice that something inexplicable has changed forever, and by the time these new habits and trends become

obvious to moribund institutions, it will be too late.

Mainline churches have been merging or closing for several decades. In the wake of this pandemic, that will greatly accelerate because the “return to normal” will be short-lived, and our churches are biding their time, waiting to get back to the way things were. It isn’t happening. Young people of faith have discovered new sources of spiritual nourishment and will be even more disillusioned with poorly done worship and inane theology. Older people, the life-stay of mainline churches, will be more reluctant than ever to put their lives at risk by gathering with others. Oh, they will return en masse to see their friends, but that will pass very quickly as self-preservation instincts overwhelm their church habits.

Many congregations have seen the future and are retooling for it. They are paying attention to the implications of what will be the “new normal” for society. Churches that thrive will adapt to, and even exploit, new cultural realities. Those faith communities are rare, though, because the church and its leadership are among the most change-resistant creatures God ever made. In this case, however, that resistance may prove fatal.

A Chinese proverb wishes for us that we “live in interesting times.” Americans may interpret this as a good thing, and, for a few congregations, it may be. For most, however, it probably will not be. The heat of the sun melts wax and hardens clay. COVID-19 is not a good thing, but, if churches are agile and adaptive, God may well be able to work it for our good (Romans 8:28). If our only plan is to get back to “normal,” then I doubt even God can save us.

**Rev. Dr. Michael Piazza** is a spiritual visionary, author, and social justice advocate. During 23 years of his courageous leadership as senior pastor and later dean, the Cathedral of Hope in Dallas, Texas, made religious history by reclaiming Christianity as a faith of extravagant grace, radical inclusion, and relentless compassion while becoming the world's largest liberal Christian church with a predominantly lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender outreach.



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***Digital is the New Normal – Churches in Germany during the Corona Pandemic***

Ralf Peter Reimann

*As a consequence of the lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, churches have grown digitally and learned that community and communion are more important than physical buildings.*

Germany was still in lockdown when this essay was written. For brevity's sake, some generalizations are necessary, since most of the in-depth data are not yet available. Conclusions are tentative and personal. However, the corona pandemic has changed the church tremendously, and church will not be the same when the pandemic is over.

Most churches in Germany are organized as corporations of public law — they even have their own data-protection laws recognized by the European Union. For most people, church membership is obtained by baptism as an infant. A person belongs to a parish according to their residence. Sunday morning worship is considered the center of the parish life. On a regular Sunday, around three percent of the members attend church. Most people pay their church taxes without actively participating in parish life. Churches are taken as a given but are not relevant in most of their members' daily lives. Overall, church membership is decreasing.

In this traditional setting, church buildings are essential, as they are the center of most activities. Of course, there are congregations with a strong digital presence which have outreach programs to attract new members, but for most churches, the focus is on activities held on church premises. Although this is somewhat of an oversimplification, there is a



general feeling that social media activities only lead to virtual encounters, whereas real encounters are face-to-face meetings. The most widespread messenger service in Germany, WhatsApp, is considered illegal according to the churches' own data-protection laws and must not be used for counseling or pastoral care. The digital readiness of many parishes is minimal.

Without warning, church services were suspended without prior notice because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some churches took this measure voluntarily a week before Germany as a country went into a lockdown. It was generally accepted that parishioners need to be protected and physical church gatherings need to be abandoned. Church laws that regulated church life were no longer applicable. A church that had relied on a physical presence had to become digital in a matter of days or become irrelevant.

“Church at home” (*“Kirche von zu Hause”*) became the guiding principle. People could no longer go to church; the church had to be brought to the members' homes. Of course, not all of the pastors and parishes could cope well with the new situation; however, it was truly amazing to see a new creativity and agility. The coronavirus crisis unleashed a new vitality. It used to take months to discuss the necessity of streaming worship services and to sort out all possible legal implications--Does the church need a broadcast license? Does the work contract of the organ player cover online streaming? to name just two of the many legal questions – now churches started to stream their services from one Sunday to the next without fully clearing everything legally. To be close to the people has become more important than a strict compliance with regulations that were made for a different time. To focus on the needs of the people rather than anticipate all possible legal

problems and be paralyzed by the problems led to a culture shift: doing church and being church instead of asking for guidance and regulations to organize church life.

One important example: The Lord's supper, traditionally celebrated on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. Can you have communion online? Or even at home without ordained clergy presiding over the communion? The theological questions have been dormant for a long time, but now definite decisions had to be made within days? Not celebrate communion at all or go new ways and trust in God that he will be with them even in the adverse circumstances of a pandemic? So many protestant congregations invited their parishioners to the Holy Communion, at home or digitally.

Of course, not everybody followed suit. There were church data-protection officers who advised church districts to close their Facebook pages because they deemed them in violation of data-protection laws, even when it meant losing a connection to many church members.

Even now, when most church activities are digital, people who are not online were not forgotten. Old-fashioned letters were sent to church members, pastors would sit on the phone and make calls or offer devotionals over the phone. Sermons were printed out and distributed in the village grocery shops that were still open. These non-digital ideas also follow the pattern used in the digital space: go out and reach people where they are.

A crisis often brings a defining moment. Initially, the media would report that church services were canceled because services in church buildings could no longer be held. Now, they report how people can join a service digitally. Being church is no longer reduced to a building, but to people coming together in

prayer and living their faith. It will be interesting to see how this notion will play out after the crisis, when some church buildings might be closed due to the financial aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Doing things differently also makes one see what is essential. Many congregations are making efforts to stream their services from their church, the pastor preaching to an online audience in front of empty pews. Public television offers a broadcast every Sunday whose quality is far superior to a video stream from a cell phone from a local church. But more important than the quality of the broadcast is where the stream comes from: the local church. Therefore, church is local and based in a community. Will parishes continue to stream after the crisis so elderly people can also see their pastor on Sunday digitally, instead of watching a broadcast on national television?

Although, no definite statistics are yet available, churches which stream their services often report that more people watch the service online than church attendance was before the lockdown. One reason to attend church online might be the unavailability of other activities. Nevertheless, online services bring people to church who did not attend church before. Another observation is that quite often, more than one person follows the online service on a device. Church can also be a network of connected individuals and families. One argument in favor of livestreaming before the coronavirus crisis was to attract new people – will churches continue streaming after the pandemic is over?

In most services, participation of the congregation is regulated and limited. Parishioners sing, they give the appropriate responses in the liturgy, they recite the creed, and say the Lord's Prayer. When it comes to digital services, it seems that the people are

much more active and open. Internet communication lowers the inhibition threshold to expressing themselves. Personal intercessions are posted online and included in the service. Digital services have become participatory. After the COVID-19 crisis, will the forms of interaction tried online find their way into church services when they take place again in the churches?

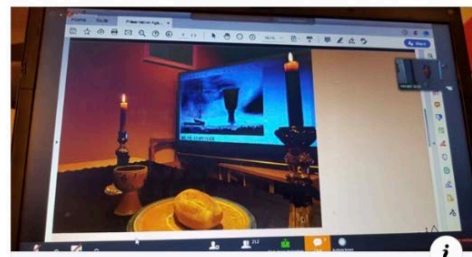
Church life has changed. Physical presence is very limited now, but churches have grown digitally. But even more important, the attitude has changed; churches have learned to reach out and make themselves relevant again to their members in a time of crisis.

**Ralf Peter Reimann** has studied computer science and theology. He was a web team leader in the Evangelical Church in Germany and a pastor with the portal [evangelisch.de](http://evangelisch.de). Currently, he is Internet Commissioner of the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland and Vice President of the Word Association of Christian Communication, European Region (WACC Europe).

" An online supper is not a quick solution in the face of the Corona crisis, but a consequential development when people also live digitally their faith.

In the blog post, the video of **Lawrence Tanner Richardson's** lecture in Loccum, introducing the example of Dinner Church. So there are templates that can now be followed. I don't see that we need more time to clarify the basic issues."-**Ralf Peter Reimann**

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***The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online in a Time of Pandemic from the Dolly Mama***  
Donna Schaper

*This essay reflects on the tangible stresses faced by many churches pre-pandemic and how the current crisis amplifies these, as well as creates momentum towards notable spiritual and practical shifts churches will encounter and need to adapt to in the future.*

Here I speak from my heart, not as an expert. As a lifer, church is tremendously important to me. I have been a pastor for over forty years in flourishing congregations, the kind that made a difference to people and their communities in which they grew and prospered. My life mission is spiritual nurture for public capacity. I pastor a progressive church with a strong piety. We love each other, for the most part, as pastor and people.

Even before the virus, we lived in a dangerous and strung-out world. People are eucharistically starving; the species had begun to devolve long before this virus came along. School shootings in which we sacrifice the young join clueless leadership and civic division to place us all in precarious positions. Our national original sin of racism required us to repeat, hoarsely, that Black lives matter. Women candidates remain invisible or ignored or declared “unelectable.” Add the virus to the pot, and it makes you boil over.

Simultaneously, with the multiple national breakdowns, many sites and religious organizations have long been in survival mode. The stresses of deferred maintenance of buildings, along with trends towards

membership loss have meant many mainline congregations are out of business already. Now under Queen Corona, the pace of congregational dissolution and property abandonment or sale will only accelerate.

Virtual worship jumped into the boiling pot as a band-aid for many. Megachurches saw the opportunity in technology of all kinds and resourced worship early enough to make it work. They were smart enough and open enough to experiment early with technology. They also embraced the two-career family and its culture by offering “full service” church mid-week instead of just Sunday. Mainline churches stayed true to their class and educational level and poo-pooed technology. Now they are scrambling to find “somebody” who knows how to film, how to send, how to video, and how to livestream.

So, what will happen? Larger congregations will do the work for smaller congregations. They will invite smaller congregations to worship virtually with them. Eventually, these congregations will merge, which they should have done a decade ago. Now they will find meaningful, technology-based worship online – as well as music, well-wrought and briefer meditations, pictures, designs – at churches not their own. They will love praising God in their pajamas and still have a primary social group with their aged congregation but not bother with the worship and the parking lot and the dysfunctional trustees’ meetings.

Of course, online worship will prevail, if for no other reason than how green it is. You don’t need a parking lot to worship online. The utility bills are also less. The people who thought they were too good for virtual worship will worship virtually, just like they podcast virtually and go to the gym virtually and talk to their grandchildren virtually. They will wonder why they waited so long and sat through dismal

services in a third-full, looking-empty sanctuary listening to people who can't sing, try to sing. This shift will happen first as a short-term fix to a longer-term problem — that of the inability of smaller membership churches to survive, anyway, any day. It will then become the new normal.

### **The Spiritual Shifts**

I am writing a book called *RemovethePews.com* in which I use the pews as a metaphor as well as an outdated kind of furniture. My argument is that spiritual experience has rendered the pew obsolete. We need to remove the pews from our sanctuaries and from our souls and our heads.

People want interactivity; they don't want to be talked at. People want relief from shame and blame — and pulpits and pews exude shame and blame. They also feature the big, male, booming voice, which sounds way too much like mean, angry-finger wagging Daddy to most people — even though half of mainline, offline clergy today are women, who just look funny in pulpits and usually end up preaching “down” instead of “up.” That means they go to the floor and get closer to people, as opposed to using the pulpit to look down on people. Not all women make this shift and not all men angrily boom.

But a trend is a trend. Merging congregations, worshipping more than one congregation in one well-heated or well-cooled place all day of a Sunday or a Wednesday night, removing the pews so different setups of chairs are possible and weekday rentals are likewise possible — all these things will help individual congregations survive long enough to pray another day in another way.

### **The Larger Picture**

The office as we know it is likely gone. Why office when you can Zoom? School as we know

it is likely gone. Why drive to school when you can plug into it? Aren't your kids always asking for screen time?

The outer world is going, and the inner world is taking hold. This shift is the best news there could possibly be — since externals had long been beating internals, 12 — 1. Lions 12, Christians 1 is the other way to count. The individual is going and the collective is prevailing. Queen Corona knows nothing about class or race, and we won't have enough time to teach her. We may even find a silver lining in what was previously understood as the higher horseshit: We are all one. We are not individuals but members, one another. *E pluribus Unum*. With liberty and justice for all.

Easter and Passover are gone, at least as we know them. They are both there and not there, and powerfully so. Like ventilators, we are desperate for the fresh breath of the religious holidays but don't have enough of them.

We might gather if we are really lucky with this bug, but the smart money is on the religious holidays joining Broadway in going dark. Theater may depend on an audience; faith does not. Faith likes an audience but doesn't require one. During the time of the Black Plague in the middle ages, people were required to go to church at 11:00 a.m. every day. That was before they knew phrases like “flatten the curve” or “social distancing” or, for that matter, molecular biology.

The weekend is also gone. No snark intended, but losing sports and kids' soccer and bars and restaurants is probably harder on people than virtual worship. Yale librarian Judith Ann Schiff explained how the weekend was invented. In 1926 Yale put an end to compulsory chapel attendance for students. The end of compulsory Sunday church services meant that everyone could live it up in the city. Now prayer is so

necessary that you don't even have to make it compulsory.

The renewed attention to the inner will be a boost to dinosaurian religious organizations. "Stop the train, I want to get off," was my pre-virus mantra. I have moved home to psalms and hymns.

Religious themes matter. We know about Easter and its affirmation of life after death and Passover and its insistence on liberation for the captives. Do we have to gather to remember these themes? Nope. They exist, even if we don't consider them, celebrate the day, or if we have to observe them alone. Or if we can't find a shank bone or an Easter egg to color. They are not their outer trappings, they are their inner truths. You've always wanted to learn how to meditate or how to have an authentic spiritual experience. Now, courtesy of the plague, you can. Spiritual clarity is neither going nor gone. We may not like what we see, but some heavy-duty spiritual crap is firmly on our screen.

There will be terrible, painful losses in these multiple transitions. Some of us still miss going to the bank. Touch and eyeballs and hugging and passing the peace will all be terrible losses, especially for the already lonely. I may sound blithe about these losses, but I am not blithe. Instead, I am a fan of the still speaking God, the one who keeps us changing and keeps changing on us. And yes, someday the screen will also make its way out the door and a fresh wind will blow in.

**Donna Schaper**, who blogs under Dolly Mama, is an ordained Baptist/UCC pastor with 42 years' experience leading congregations. She is intrigued by the Buddhism of the Dalai Lama and the music of Dolly Parton. She is married to a practicing Jew. Her spirituality is blended and blending. Her last published book of 37 is "I

*Heart You Francis:" Love Letters From A Reluctant Admirer.* Queen Corona has asked her to say something, and she has agreed. The recipe is one-part detachment, one-part engagement, all unbearably light

## Going . . . going . . . gone: the Dolly Mama's Guide to Spirituality



Donna Schaper [Follow](#)  
Mar 29 · 4 min read



***Is Your Church Ready for Social Distancing?***

Troy Shepherd

*While replicating traditional aspects of church into an online format may feel necessary in a time of crisis, giving space and encouragement for more creative experiments about what church could have better and more positive long-term social implications for the future of the church*

April 1st is often associated with “April Fools Day” for most Americans. But April 1, 2020, has seen a much different landscape for those all around the world. We currently find ourselves at a time when social distancing is the norm that we are called to live in. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, people across the globe have been given instructions to put distance between themselves and others. The hope is that by minimizing contact between individuals, disease transmission will be prevented. Group events and public spaces in many countries have been shut down or closed, and many are told to avoid crowds if at all possible. For churches, this has meant canceling their weekly gatherings.

And for churches, this is a big deal. The life of most churches revolves around their weekly services. It is the one time in the week when church members gather together, connect socially, share a common experience, serve one another, and exercise their faithful practice of spiritual worship.

Ask most people what the church is, and they will likely describe some kind of worship event. Seeing the church as an event has become commonplace in the western world. Unfortunately, most of those who attend weekly church services don't know anything

different. The reality in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is that the church is seen by many as simply an embodied gathering.

The weekly service is also the focus of most pastors' or priests' energies. While they may be trained in other areas, such as pastoral counseling and religious education, it is running this event that takes up most church leaders' time and efforts. It is the space where they communicate to members and the structure around which other programs are built. The liturgy that they use helps define their identity of who they are as a church.

So what happens when a physical event is no longer an option? What happens when gathering in a specific place at a specific time is no longer possible or safe? What is the church then?

In mid-March 2020, churches and leaders across North America and Europe had to face these questions head-on. Most responded by trying to figure out how to translate their in-person services into online experiences. Many how-to guides have been circulated online offering advice on how church leaders can livestream their sermon or a makeshift service. Their goal is to offer members a worship service somewhat similar to that experienced during the in-person weekly event but in the safety of their own homes.

Yet with hundreds of new Facebook livestream church experiments going on by the end of March 2020, many at around the same time on Sunday morning, the online system of servers were overloaded. Many members logged on to blank screens or saw their pastor's hard work to try and provide a live service get delayed several hours or even constant buffering during the live service event.

It raises the question, is livestreaming a church service really the best response for a church community? Is that what the church is all about: simply offering a worship experience resulting in passive consumers of religion? Or was the church meant to be something else, something more life altering, more transformational?

Instead of seeing this season of social distancing as a hardship to overcome or a problem to solve, maybe this could be viewed as an opportunity. What if we asked ourselves this series of questions:

- “What is the church supposed to be in our pandemic world and afterward?”
- “Should churches put their efforts into investing in digital technology to replicate what has always been done, or could there be a more reflective approach to doing church using technology?”
- “What do people who value the biblical definition of the church really need?”
- “What technological decisions can best help the church build a biblical identity and a missional approach to members living a disciple-based life?”

This is a unique moment to consider what it means to be a community in a world of social distancing. Technology can definitely help us bridge the social distance between people, but why not invest energy and creativity into creating new ways of connecting, supporting, and tangibly caring for one another during this time? The needs of church members have been made clear as research has shown that Americans are tired of the usual church experience (Barna Group, 2020). So many churchgoers say that they still long for

meaningful connection and spiritual input as active church participants.

These are issues I have been thinking about quite a bit. For the last two years, I have been studying the state of the church in America, looking at trends in church attendance, religious beliefs, and affiliations. This research led me to develop [Shepherding My Church](#) as a way to help engage a church’s vision of what the New Testament definition of the word church (*ecclesia*) means in a 21st century culture. The process begins with a paradigm shift of the word church and leads church leadership through a discovery process of the desired mission for their church.

The statistics show church attendance in all sectors, including Protestant, Catholic, mainline, and evangelical, is decreasing (Barna Group, 2020). Old models of doing church just don’t seem to be working or connecting with the next generations of Millennials and Gen Z. The idea that “all will go back to normal” after a global, life-altering pandemic is likely not going to be the reality.

My work with Shepherding My Church led me to investigate what it means to be a spiritual community in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and how we can use technology to help build deeper community connections for believers. Part of my answer to how churches can leverage technology to build spiritual community has manifested in a unique app I have designed called [SURROUND](#), due to launch in April 2020.

This app development project looks at how technology can be a tremendous help in building a spiritual community of meaningful connections. The aim is to offer a platform that provides churches a social networking space where members can build spiritual connections with one another. My hope is that this platform will connect church members in local

## *The Distanced Church*

communities that will lead to genuine spiritual engagement with each other beyond the walls of a church.

At the time of this writing, a number of churches are currently struggling with how to respond to the social distancing directive. Timing is often essential for deep impact. If this app were already available and being used by a multitude of churches before the pandemic occurred, spiritual communities would already be in place. These churches would have a platform that would provide avenues of connection that go beyond the walls of the church. What we need at this time is to not just replicate traditional aspects of the church online, but to give space and provide resources for more creative experiments about what the church could be.

Instead of social distancing being something to be feared by church organizations, we need to see it as a unique opportunity to reimagine the church and bring hope to a world full of fear, anxiety, and scarcity mentalities.

**Troy Shepherd** is a disruptive digital entrepreneur. He has become intrigued by how authentic communities are formed and understanding community impact. He is attempting to disrupt a 2,000-year-old tradition simply by asking whether the American church's influence is still relevant in today's cultural society. He is the founder of [Shepherding My Church](#) and developer of the [SURROUND](#) mobile app.

### **Source**

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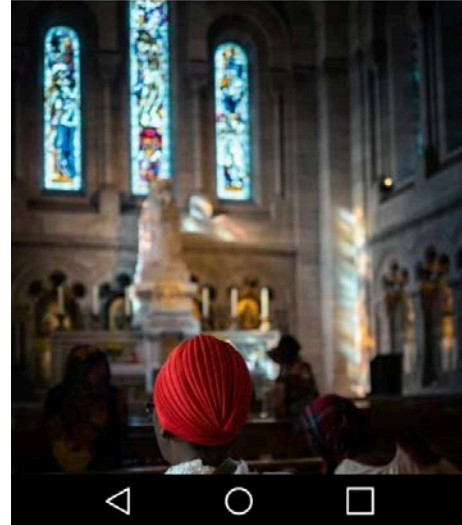


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**Four Lessons I've Learned So Far in the Wake  
of the Pandemic**

David Silverkors

*Four lessons: The need to be church online, the reality of spiritual community online, the value of historical spiritual practices, and the need to do the theological work of translating church to*

The current situation has affected my views on doing as well as being church online; I will present four "lessons" I've learned so far. I have been quite interested in these issues for quite some time. But I have always had a pretty strong focus on the local community that meets AFK (away from keyboard). And perhaps, early examples of online church in the virtual world of Second Life both fascinated me and made me wary of "replacing" the physical community with an online version of it. So, I have had a hard time trying to find ways to fully integrate the local church community with the online life as church. For those who have been like me in this regard, I suspect, things have somewhat changed quite quickly now.

Church of Sweden is the former state church of Sweden. It labels itself Evangelical-Lutheran. Membership is at about 59% of the population, i.e., 5.9 million members. In Sweden, as in other countries in Europe, people have a decreasing sense of connection to organized traditional religion. It has already been more than enough trying to connect with people in the physical world. This, I believe, has contributed to not looking for those seeking spiritual life online.

**The Need to be Church Online**

The ongoing crisis due to the pandemic is increasingly forcing the ordinary worshipping

community in Church of Sweden to go online. Either that, or you fall outside the active spiritual life in the church that you are used to. The other day, a parishioner called. She belongs to several risk groups and is therefore staying in her home. She shared her disappointment with the religious service broadcasts, since they are no longer similar to the usual church services. I suspect that many like her will find that long ago, Swedish public service TV changed the format of the worship services.

When I explained to her that we have video-recorded morning prayers posted on Facebook, and that we will livestream our services at Easter there as well, she answered, "I don't have Facebook." And pointing out that you don't need an account to access those livestreams didn't help, in her mind. Both priests and employees in the parishes and members have more to learn about broadcasting, as well as receiving, livestreaming services.

In the past, discussions on livestreaming services always tended to be strongly problematized based on the fact that the service participants' private lives would be jeopardized. Now, although there is a limit of 50 participants gathering at one and the same time, this issue has totally disappeared! Everything should be fine, as long as we don't record those who don't sign up to be viewed on screen. This resistance and quick change of mind is, of course, nothing strange or remarkable in itself. We humans have a built-in inertia to change, and perhaps livestreaming on the internet hasn't really been viewed as very essential before. It took the fact that the regular parish members started to stay at home for us to provide this way to take part in worship. This is now accessible not only to those, but also those who would never come to a service otherwise.

As a vicar and parish priest, I see great opportunities and a great need to not only livestream services during the pandemic, but also to do so continuously in the future. This is because many people do not have the opportunity to participate in the worship service locally, perhaps for health reasons or lack of time. But also, for geographical reasons. This may, of course, have been an issue since before the pandemic. But now perhaps we have started to understand. Not just me, but also many within my church body.

### **Spiritual Community Online**

A friend who was over for dinner told me there would be a half hour of prayer soon on Zoom, and we were welcome to participate. In total, there were maybe 8 connections with a total of about 15 people participating. After a brief presentation and review of the topics that the group has been praying for recently, new prayer topics were raised and then we prayed together.

My reflection on it was, how simple, and with a total lack of defined roles, it all worked out. We didn't know each other, but now we were together in the same digital room and prayed together, for each other and others that we had mentioned. And we were a fairly large group that met without most of us ever having met before.

The online spiritual community is as true, honest, and real as it is when we are physically together. However, I still see a special value in also physically gathering for prayer and worship. But the digital form should neither be underestimated nor seen as of slightly less value than other forms of praying together.

### **The Value of Historical Spiritual Practices**

In my church, spiritual communion has not been particularly prominent in recent times. But it is becoming more emphasized now, at

least in some contexts. In the Lutheran understanding of the sacraments, Christ is truly present in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper. This was a major and important theological issue in the Reformation, together with every Christian's right to receive also the wine, not just the bread. This historical background can today cause problems by viewing it as wrong to willingly receive the Sacrament in one form, which is an increasingly common practice now. Another now-actualized option is to not receive the physical bread and wine, but to participate through spiritual communion.

In this context, spiritual communion means to make the longing for receiving the bread and wine of the communion be a part of one's own prayer and longing for Christ. And in this prayer, to receive the special blessing associated with this longing. Maybe rediscovering practices that we have forgotten about or aren't coming to think of in this context can help us move towards being church online?

### **The Theological Work of Translating Church to the Online Context**

I believe reflections on how we can practice Christian life in a new situation are extremely important to the church. We must resist the urge to be too quick and perhaps throw out theology in our struggle to move the church online. The theological groundwork of relating what we do with what we believe and are already doing needs to be done. Surely, it would be tempting to sit down with bread and wine and attend a celebration of the mass over the internet? But in a Lutheran context, it is a very difficult thing to give strong theological reasons for. Other alternatives from the church's rich history may emerge, such as spiritual communion. Many Christian practices have already been established and can freely be practiced, under our specific circumstances. Although in many ways things are moving

quickly now, it is important to take the time to "translate" the church identity into the spiritual life online.

There are, of course, many more discoveries to be made in being and doing church online. I look forward to learning more, from both parishioners and theologians, as well as others.

**David Silverkors** was ordained in 2008. He has been a parish priest mainly in Uppsala diocese in Church of Sweden. His main focus during the first ten years as a minister has been youth work and online presence. Now he, as vicar, is trying to find good ways of being church online.



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***Grief, Awareness, and Blessing – The Experience of Ministry Online During a Pandemic***

Bryony Taylor

*This essay explores the experience of a priest in the UK grappling with ministry online during a time of pandemic. It looks at three themes: grief (what we have lost), awareness (what we are able to still do), and blessing (the new connections we are making).*

In the first week or two of lockdown in the UK, I saw a post on a Facebook page that I follow called Anam Cara Ministries that contained this reflection: "This meditation was recently posted by J.R. Briggs. Spend some time with these questions quietly with God today.

1. What has the coronavirus (and I would add, this experience) taken away from you today? [grief]
2. What has the coronavirus/this experience NOT taken away from you today? [awareness]
3. What has the coronavirus/this experience given you today? [blessing]" (Anam Cara, 2020)"

I found this a helpful way to reflect spiritually on the experience of the pandemic. I also think it's a helpful way to reflect on ministry in a time of pandemic, so I will use this structure for this essay exploring:

- Grief – what have we lost and what are the challenges we now face?
- Awareness – what can we still do, what resources do we have available to us to adapt?
- Blessing – what new blessings have we experienced during this period?

### **1. Grief**

I work in the context of two small parishes in a former mining community. I am the only paid staff at the church, and I do not have an administrator or a team that puts together a newsletter. The vast majority of my congregation members are over the age of 65, and a large proportion of them do not use or have access to the internet at home. I see myself as having almost two congregations – those who attend Sunday services in church and those who follow us online (mainly through our Facebook pages). I seek to serve both these communities in my ministry. The closure of our churches and imposition of social distancing, therefore, had a big impact on our parishioners (as it has everywhere). I face a number of challenges in conducting ministry in our new context: lack of digital literacy (those who do use the internet mainly to use Facebook or WhatsApp to keep in touch with family), a reliance on the priest to mediate worship (ours are traditional parishes, people are often reluctant to volunteer their skills in helping to lead worship), and a challenge to our sacramental embodied ministry (we have a Eucharist every Sunday and this is the center of our worshipping life). Many of our congregation members also live alone, and their involvement in church life is one of their main social activities.

### **2. Awareness**

In the early stages of the UK lockdown, many priests rushed to livestream church services on Facebook and YouTube. They were effectively trying to replicate the church-based experience online. Before I was ordained, I worked in the area of digital technology and online learning. The online environment is one that I am very comfortable in – it blends almost seamlessly with my offline life. I am a resident online, rather than a visitor. I prefer this terminology to that of digital native and digital immigrant (White & Le Cornu, 2011).

If we imagine the online environment as a country, then we can imagine it has its own language. When I first was learning Estonian when I lived there for a year, I began by having a sentence I wanted to say in English in my head, and then went through the process of trying to translate that sentence word for word into Estonian. I quickly realized that wasn't going to work. I needed to start with the vocabulary I knew and work from there. It is the same when considering online worship. We are not trying to replicate what happens in church online – we are trying to create new forms of worship that work online. It is important that we work with what we have and also use what will work for our context. For example, I chose, early on, not to use Zoom for my worship at this stage because of the context I am in – the few members of the congregation who do use the internet are basic users of Facebook. To introduce something unfamiliar when everything is currently in turmoil, for me, felt inappropriate. I made the decision to use Facebook livestreaming only for a simple midweek Eucharist and notices on a Sunday. Live streaming is a new experience for many, and it can often go wrong (for example, if your internet connection drops), so doing the church notices live on Facebook worked for me because if it did go wrong, it didn't really matter. I prerecord my Sunday services which are posted on YouTube as a video for people to follow at home. I have tried to include things in our Sunday worship online that we would not be able to do in the building, rather than trying to reproduce what we would be doing in our building online.

### **3. Blessing**

In my previous research into sharing faith online, I identified the fact that online spaces offer people an anonymity they do not have in face-to-face settings, which gives them confidence to explore faith without fear of

ridicule or the barrier of walking through a church door (Taylor, 2016). We have seen this phenomenon clearly since the coronavirus pandemic hit. Casual observers of our church activities on Facebook have begun to attend livestreamed services and have commented on them. People are dipping their toes into worship because of our ready availability in their pocket or on the laptop in front of them (Taylor, 2016). This is one of the blessings we are seeing. Another is that our congregations have been forced to take some responsibility for their own discipleship. Many are engaging with the daily prayer podcast I am sharing, whereas normally, I say morning and evening prayer in my churches alone. Congregation members are also learning to use new technology so that they can take part in worship. One elderly church member learned how to record her voice using WhatsApp and led our intercessions in our online service. Those who previously saw technology as something to be wholly mistrusted are now finding it essential in keeping them connected both with family and with church.

I think it is no coincidence that our experience of the global pandemic began during the season of Lent, as one wag put it online “this is the Lentiest Lent I have ever Lented!” Just as Lent comes to an end with resurrection hope, so we will come out of this experience with resurrection hope and find blessings in the midst of grief.

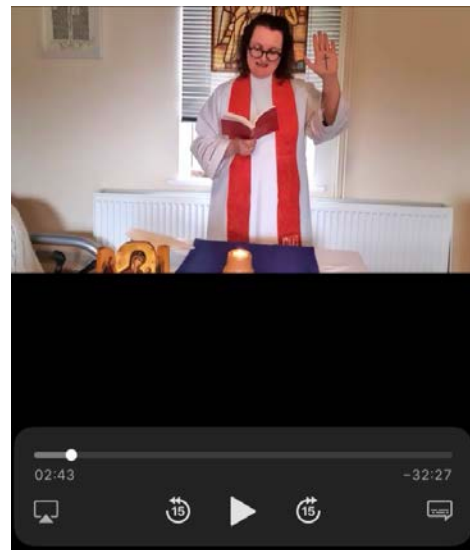
**Rev’d Bryony Taylor** is Rector of Barlborough and Clowne in Derby Diocese, United Kingdom. Before ordination in 2014, Bryony worked in the field of learning technology and as a social media consultant. She is now a rector of two small parishes in Derbyshire in the United Kingdom – former mining communities whose congregations are largely made up of people over the age of 65.

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**Being Benedictine Online**

Catherine Wybourne

*The experience of online presence of a small cloistered community, its rationale and development over 17 years.*

In 2003, along with three others, I found myself in a newly-formed cloistered community without much physical space and very little money — a complete contrast to our previous community. Hospitality is an important value in the Rule of St. Benedict, so we reflected together on how we might exercise that, using the emerging technologies of the internet. We began by asking,

- *Why* do we want to go online?
- How can the Rule and the Gospel inform our online presence?
- *What* are the advantages and disadvantages?

St. Benedict says every guest should be welcomed as though Christ and provides a structure we tried to follow:

- Welcome
- Prayer
- Sharing the word of God
- Showing kindness
- Providing nourishment and service.

The advantages of using the internet were its cheapness, the fact that comparatively few religious communities were making much use of it in 2003, and it enabled us to reach many more people than we could in the village where we lived. It also ensured a specifically Benedictine presence online, and allowed us to maintain some control over the number of people we interacted with. Guests, real or virtual, can overwhelm a community unless

there is a disciplined approach to how much time is set aside for them.

First, we built a website, to which we added interactive elements as they became available. Initially, there were a lot of forms for requesting prayer, more information about monastic life, and so on. We added a blog to share reflections on the Christian life and the events of the day and to give people a sense of engagement with the nuns. Then came a dedicated forum, aimed specifically at Benedictine oblates — people associated with a community but who do not live within the monastery confines. Next, short podcasts, none more than about three minutes long, including an audio version of the text of the Rule of St. Benedict, read day by day as in the monastery; a few videos on YouTube; and some interactive online meetings, open to anyone who wished.

In 2009, we set up Twitter and Facebook accounts. Our first tweet is always a prayer intention while our Facebook page includes an expanded list of intentions for the day, which people can add to. This latter requires regular “policing” to identify and delete unsuitable content. Again, engagement with people, dialoguing, not just broadcasting to them, is our aim, but that has also enormously increased the number of emails we get. Going online means a commitment of time and energy a community must be prepared to keep up.

We also developed another website for online retreats. We provided written and audio material and offered Live Chat at stated times, as well as email support. Unfortunately, one of the images we used turned out to be from someone who did not hold the copyright he said he did. To avoid being sued, we took down the site and are now working on a way of integrating it with one of our others. We also separated our blog from the main website, a decision we are now reconsidering.

The dangers we identified at first are still those that occupy us today. We decided that one person should be responsible for all online outreach, to provide cohesion and avoid the kind of rows that bedevil committees. That means placing an immense amount of trust in that person but also giving support and maintaining proper scrutiny. There are no shortcuts to compliance with legal requirements.

We also decided that we must agree on limits to our sharing. So, we have deliberately chosen not to livestream our liturgy nor share “vocation stories” — they are too personal and too intense for a very small cloistered community. We are also aware that there is a danger of wanting to be “celebrity nuns” or cultivating a personal following at the expense of the community project.

All this worked well while we had access to good broadband, but in 2012 we moved to rural Herefordshire and discovered what an impact that has on what we are able to do. All our plans for expanding what we do online now have to be assessed in the light of what is technically-feasible. We had to end the open online meetings, although we continue to use video conferences for our own oblates and those thinking about entering the monastery. As we have become better known, we have had to give more attention to the security of our sites. Our experience of having malicious code injected into our blog, for example, means we now have 24/7 professional monitoring of all our sites, which is costly.

The advent of COVID-19 has made us ponder how we can best support others online. We have opted to make few changes, beyond adding audio to our blog posts because the sound of another human voice can be comforting to those who are isolated. We have

revised our safeguarding policy to cover our use of online technologies. We see our role as focusing on prayer and reflection (worship in the broader sense) rather than offering fellowship, but the boundary between the two is fluid. We see no need to duplicate what others are doing and are reluctant to add to a passive, “consumerist” approach to religion that could become one unintended consequence of livestreaming services, etc. It also means that we can remain local. Our outreach is international but remains firmly rooted, as Benedictines are, in our local soil. What we do is little enough, but it is done in the hope of leading others to Christ and helping them along the way.

**Catherine Wybourne** read history at Girton College, Cambridge, did research in Spain, and spent a few years in banking before entering Stanbrook Abbey, Worcester. She was an early adopter of all things digital and is a founding member of Holy Trinity Monastery where she blogs regularly.



**What Religious Groups Need to Consider when  
Trying to do Church Online**

Heidi A Campbell

*While many churches are focused on the technological requirements and digital skills needed to take their worship online, it is the interactive communication and relational aspects of digital community that people most desire in their experiences of church online.*

**Wisdom from Scholars of  
Digital Religion and  
Theology:  
Research Reflections on  
Doing Religion Online**

**Social Distancing Leads to Rethinking Church**

Since the middle of March, I have spent my Sunday mornings watching portions of over 50 different church services streaming on my Facebook feed. I have been able to visit a variety of Episcopalian, Baptist, Catholic, Methodist, nondenominational and evangelical churches around the USA and Europe. Many of these churches are streaming their services online for the very first time. As I watched these varied attempts to take offline worship online, one question kept coming to mind: Do these churches really know what it means to do church online? This is a question I have been pondering over the last twenty-five years as someone who has studied religious communities' use of digital media.

In the 1990s I began investigating what religious communities look like online and how people compare them to their offline faith communities. I have watched over time how different Christian groups have used emerging media to take their services online and tried to create religious communities online. Over and over, and in the multiple research studies I have conducted, I find most pastors and churches focus their attention on the pragmatic aspects of doing church online. This includes asking what platform is best to use and easiest to learn, what technology resource is most cost-effective, and what aspect of a church



service needs some modification in its livestreaming format. Yet these are not the key questions people ask when seeking out a religious community online. In my first book, *Exploring Religious Community Online* (2005), based on in-depth online and offline research I conducted in the mid-1990s to early 2000s, I documented a series of desired traits that kept people invested in a particular online religious community. Even though I have been talking and writing about these findings for two decades, as I reviewed the examples of churches popping up online during the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, it seemed religious leaders have not given attention to my observations and the advice I have tried to offer over and over again.

As priests and pastors have rushed to find new ways to provide church service experiences for their members, the internet has become the go-to alternative for replacing traditional face-to-face worship. The result has been a wide range of how-to guides and articles being circulated to pastors via social media with advice on how to livestream their sermons or create a makeshift online gathering. However, I argue in this article few people are asking the most important question: What do people need from churches right now? And how might digital technology be best used to meet those needs?

### **Desired Traits of Community Online**

While digital technologies have changed over the past two decades, one thing that has not changed in my observations is what people are looking for when they go online to experience Christian community or church online. In my book *Exploring Religious Community Online*, I identified the traits that draw people to a specific online group and encourage their investment in it. This work was based on five years of conducting online and offline

interviews and doing participant observation of people's communication practices in three different online Christian communities with members in North America and the United Kingdom. I found that people most valued six traits about their online communities. While other scholars have also studied a variety of aspects over the past two decades, my work remains the pioneering research, because I documented the specific communication traits people look for in these religious online settings.

- First, they are looking for a sense of relationship—not simply a place to share information, but a space that allowed them to form a network of social relations and friendships. As a woman from Illinois I interviewed said, "What I am experiencing on the internet is a true Christian relationship... it makes the whole thing of the Bride of Christ more feasible, a reality... not just something to read about."
- Second, they are looking for care, a space where they can give and receive support and encouragement. As a lawyer from Michigan I spoke to reported, "I've had communication online where I've really felt 'hugged' when I really need it."
- Third, they are looking for value, to be appreciated for their contributions and presence online. A man from the UK involved in an online Anglican community described this saying, "I've tried to leave the group three times, but I've always rejoined because I miss the people, I miss the banter, and I miss how they encourage me."
- Fourth, people are longing for connection, the ability to have 24/7

contact with others that internet technology easily facilitates. An accountant from Missouri involved in a prophetic learning community explained, "I know on the (group) when someone says they'll pray for me, they will. That's a trust because I have seen it happen. Whereas at church someone can say 'oh I'll pray for you,' but I don't know that they will."

- Fifth, people online are looking for intimate communication—a safe place where they can be themselves and communicate openly with others. "We have been absolutely amazed at how the Holy Spirit can use something like email to touch the hearts of folks halfway around the world, even to the point that they weep," said a vision-impaired woman from the UK who described the online Christian group as her church.
- The sixth and final component, people in online communities long for fellowship with others of a shared faith, like-minded believers who share their beliefs and sense of purpose. As a man from Toronto reported, "The (group) is just another expression of Jesus Christ and His church and His calling of us to be ministers of the gospel."

Whether people called their group an online Christian community or an online church, their answers were the same. They were looking for a faith-based social network where they could build relationships, share their faith, and find meaning and value in their interactions and place in the groups. Over the past two decades, I have done multiple studies looking at different manifestations of church online. Over and over, I hear these same traits echoed in interviews of what people value most about the relationships

and communities they are invested in, both online and offline.

### **Observations and Trends in this Season of Doing Church Online**

I have watched with curiosity over the last month as three dominant strategies emerged regarding religious leaders seeking to do church online. The most common strategy is transferring their standard offline worship services to an online platform, with Facebook livestreaming being the most popular option. This is especially true for priests and pastors from mainline churches (i.e., Methodist, Episcopal) intent on simply transferring their traditional worship services online. Many church leaders filmed themselves in empty sanctuaries, alone, or with a few assistants singing psalms, offering calls and responses to liturgical readings, and staring close range into the camera while broadcasting a sermon to their members. Their goal seems to be to offer members a somewhat similar worship service but in the safety of their own homes.

A few others used a translation strategy, as they tried to modify their worship rituals and space to fit onto a limited screen. Here, I saw many nondenominational and interdenominational churches, who were already used to using media in their services, creating makeshift studios to host their online services. They seemed to translate their worship experience into more of a talk show format, where a pastor served as a host introducing the worship band as if they were musical guests and cuts to church leaders interviewing other staff members about their thoughts on the current pandemic and what a Christian response might look like. Some attempts to translate worship from offline to online include a limited interactive element, such as encouraging members to ask questions about to what they saw via Facebook comments or a Twitter feed.

These strategies of transferring or translating church are services that mirror or modify specific aspects of normal worship practices. Their aim seemingly was to replicate the core aspects of Christian worship—singing, scripture reading, and preaching—in easily identifiable ways. However, there was a third option available to churches, that of transforming public worship, though this was only seen in three online services I observed.

In one Anglican, one evangelical, and one Nazarene online church service, I saw church leaders appearing to use the shift to online as an opportunity to rethink the essence of the church—what do members need—and transforming their worship services accordingly. Here, the standard “praise and worship sandwich”—joyful praise songs followed by an emotional sermon and then reflective worship music—was abandoned for more of a “fireside chat model.” The pastor or senior ministers sat on couches as if they were having a conversation with their members, offering honest reflection on their own struggles with the pandemic situation and creating a dialogue between themselves and their members, asking members to share their prayer requests and thoughts in real time via social media or texts during and after the broadcast service.

These online church experiments were closest to what my research spoke of nearly twenty years ago. Successful online communities and church experiences are those that cultivate social relationships and investment from their members.

### **Moving towards Relational Community Online**

Churches should see the move to digital worship as an opportunity to create a unique space for conversation, care, and encouragement that focuses on affirming the relationships and people within their faith

community. Instead of offering a one-way, broadcast-focused church service, the interactive features of social media and digital platforms can be used to create deeper personal connections between church members and leaders. Instead of pastors being the source of wisdom, digital media can be used to create intimate and empathetic communication, allowing both members and leaders to share words of encouragement and biblical insights on how to navigate this uncertain time.

Though the last two services I mentioned were marked by some technical glitches or online buffering, they were the most engaging and exciting to me. These two churches seemed to more fully grasp the unique possibilities digital technology offers for community building and caring communication, as well as the chance to reimagine what it means to be a church in the digital age.

I hope in the weeks to come to see many more such experiments. I also hope churches will take this time as an opportunity to rethink what church is and could be in an age of digital technology. Most of all, I hope they will take time to ask their members what they really need from their spiritual community during this time and seek to design their church services around those needs.

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***The Biggest Challenge for Churches at this Time***

John Dyer

*The easiest elements of church to move online are broadcast-oriented (sermons and music), while the most challenging elements are relational (congregational singing, noticing a visitor, etc.).*

**Introduction**

As many researchers have pointed out, there have been forms of online church for several decades, starting in the 1980s and accelerating in the early 2000s. But for the majority of Christians around the world, the online church began in March 2020. Before that, a “high tech” church may have had a website, been active on social media, or even had a livestream of their service, but very few had tried to connect with their people entirely through online technology. For many leaders, the coronavirus pandemic was the first time they seriously engaged the question, “How do we do church online?” But as the weeks went on, many found that this was not the most challenging question they faced.

**The Question Is Not Merely Technological—It Is Ecclesiological**

Initially, the “how” question was primarily technological in nature, connected to a series of choices about which technology to use—YouTube or Zoom, laptop webcam or professional camera. But beyond the occasional priest who accidentally turned on a colorful filter, most found that these technologies were not terribly difficult to master. An Anglican priest could walk through their liturgy almost as easily as an evangelical church could broadcast their musicians and pastors. There are incrementally more advanced things that can

be done with lighting, sound, and visuals, but broadcasting some form of a worship service was not as difficult as it first seemed.

After these initial technological hurdles, the more significant challenge churches face is moving from the technological “how” to the ecclesiological “how.” In other words, they must ask the more fundamental questions of what they mean when they say “church,” and what they do when they “do church.” As Campbell (2010) showed more than a decade ago, the way a community of faith negotiates technology is heavily influenced by their history, tradition, and authority structures. But these factors tend to go unquestioned until an event like the advent of the internet or a pandemic forces leaders to take a fresh look at what they do and who they are.

### **Moving from Broadcast Church to Online Church**

Being forced to move online offers church leaders a unique opportunity to think through how the core elements of their worship service such as songs, sermons, and sacraments actually work and the meanings that have been assigned to them. Experimenting with different forms of media and observing how they change, reshape, add to, and take away from the in-person experience can also help clergy see the in-person experience more clearly and find new ways to connect throughout the week.

They are likely to find something that the entrepreneurs of online churches have known for some time—that the elements of a worship service conducted by professional clergy are the least challenging to move online. These religious acts can be easily broadcasted and indeed have been broadcast since the advent of technologies like radio and television. And yet when leaders reflect on what they mean by “church” or “worship,” it is likely that it involves much more than their own actions during a

service. People may be initially attracted to a church for its preaching, music, or building, but they stay because of the relationships they form and the community they experience.

The church, as the popular saying goes, is not just a building; it is also the warm greeting a new visitor receives, the sound of a toddler running loose in the halls, and the smells of incense in worship or food at the potluck. Worship is not merely hearing the chants or chords of professionals, but hearing those around us sing, even if off key, and seeing them move or sway (or not) according to the norms of our tradition. These elements are simultaneously the most challenging to foster online and the very things that move a church from being broadcast oriented to the multi-directional, interactive communal experience we find in person.

Church, too, is the conversations that happen before, after, and even during a service and which continue afterward through calls, texts, emails, and social media. And this leads us to what digital church researchers have been saying for some time—that religious people move fluidly between online and offline environments throughout the week, and they move between different networks or relationships, many of which are outside their local congregation.

### **Access to Research and Learning through Doing**

The present challenges church leaders face in doing church online may have also been exacerbated by a disconnect between most of these church leaders and the research and resources created by scholars and other experienced churches. This volume contains entries by scholars and practitioners who have decades of experience, and yet in the weeks following the outbreak of the pandemic, hundreds of articles were written with no

knowledge of (or reference to) this large pool of knowledge, wisdom, and experience.

This disconnect may stem from the fact that ministry is often—to borrow a programming term—a just-in-time (JIT) operation, or one that is put together in moments just before it happens. The liturgy may be long-established, but the homily is not finished until Sunday morning. This pace leaves little time to investigate something like online church that was, heretofore, reserved for a few entrepreneurial churches to try. It may also be because a church had no sufficient reason to question their existing practice until it needed to move online. A nondenominational church, for example, may offer communion quarterly and use the mode of intinction when they do, but not be entirely sure why they chose this cadence or practice until they are faced with the question of whether they will offer it online. It is not until these questions are urgent that a leader seeks guidance.

Another reason for the disconnect between research and practice is that technological knowledge is often tacit knowledge, something that must be experienced to be fully understood. A pastor can read about the challenges of delivering a sermon to a camera rather than a room full of people she loves, but the experience of doing so will develop her proficiency in ways reading cannot. As church leaders continue to practice the act of doing church online, they may begin to seek out more practical resources from those who have gone before and even produce new insights of their own.

My hope is that these lived experiences of worshipping, preaching, and communing online will enable clergy not merely to broadcast their services with more technical acumen, but to delve deeper into their own traditions, exploring why they believe what they believe

and do what they do. In this, may God speak through them and their church in fresh ways.

**John Dyer** (PhD, Durham University) is a dean and professor at Dallas Theological Seminary. After a 20-year career as a web developer, his research in digital religion has focused on digital Bibles and the role of programmers in shaping religious behaviors.



***The Distanced Church: Pragmatism, Creativity,  
and Rhythms of Life***

Stephen Garner

*The sudden shift to online distance delivery of church services is marked by a mixture of pragmatism, creativity, and attention to life outside of the Sunday service.*

A while back, I was invited to be part of a panel on digital ecclesiology. Perhaps a little naively, and probably because I'm primarily a theologian, I took that to mean that we'd be focusing on how our theologies of the church interact with digital media. I do this with my students and church groups when we meet to think about how being wrapped in media shapes our Christian lives. While the discussion included elements of this topic, the focus was on pragmatic uses of technology in church contexts. I've been reflecting on this as I've watched churches grapple with COVID-19 and our imposed isolation and, as the memes have it, "suddenly, just like that...everyone was going to church on Facebook."

This almost instantaneous lurch from regular physical worship gatherings to remote synchronous and asynchronous modes, active interaction and passive consumption, shifts in authority and responsibility, and ongoing negotiation of this new reality, has brought the practices and traditions of the Christian church crashing into the digital world in both established and novel ways. While this is often manifested in pragmatism that overrides theology, I also observe some hopeful signs of creativity emerging that point forward to a deeper attention to the rhythms of Christian faith, life, and the world around us.

**Pragmatism**

As mentioned previously, there is a strong pragmatic element to online engagement driven by the need to have something, anything, ready for the next Sunday. This provides any number of examples of Chris Helland's (2000) classic category of *religion online*, where existing religious institutions project their physical life and tradition directly into the online space. There is the familiarity of typical worship services with hymns, songs, prayers, readings, sermons, and benedictions replicated on social media that then sits awkwardly with a worship band or preacher facing empty sanctuaries, of an inability to "pass the peace" to another flesh-and-blood human being, and the shared fellowship of conversation and a cup of tea or coffee after the service.

One sticking point for online expressions of church has been the physicality attached to the administration of sacraments. For churches that downplay the sacramental nature of communion and baptism, seeing them, perhaps, as a non-mystical remembrance, moving to self-service online communion might be relatively straightforward. For those for whom the physical consecration of Eucharistic elements requires a priest, or where the elements need to be sourced from an approved provider, or those elements are physically altered in the administration of the sacrament "going online," it is significantly harder or even impossible. Moreover, other sacramental practices, such as the anointing for healing, will also be limited by social isolation that introduces anxiety amongst the faithful who see these things as essential to their Christian life and salvation, no matter the comfort offered by broadcast visual masses and suchlike. It will be interesting to see how far denominations will flex around this, and if so,

how that shapes the ongoing authority of church doctrine.

This pragmatic streak also makes itself felt in a localized milieu, with each congregation attempting to replicate their own worship service and community to their members. The speed at which the social isolationing happened influenced this, but perhaps there is an element of not thinking as collegially as one might. What might the witness of the gospel look like to those inside and outside the church if, on any given Sunday, Christians from a variety of churches gathered together online for collaborative worship that emphasized the commonality of the gospel of Jesus Christ, demonstrated church communities supporting one another, and provided hope to a wider world in need of that.

Of course, there are counterexamples to this. The Ongar MMU, an Anglican congregation within the Chelmsford Diocese in the UK, encouraged people across churches to mark their palms with a cross on Palm Sunday and share the photo with the hashtag *#palmcrosses20*. Denominational social media groups have emerged to promote sharing of ideas and support for congregations at regional and national levels, such as the Facebook group “COVID-19 pcanz — ideas for resourcing ministry” set up by the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand; a similar group, “Resourcing UCA Congregations in Non-Contact Times,” in the Uniting Church of Australia; or any number of online interdenominational prayer events. That said, perhaps we’ll see more collaborative efforts at local, grassroots levels in the near future and if social isolating continues into the long term.

### **Creativity & Rhythms of Everyday Life**

Pragmatism is not the only theme running these distanced churches, creativity is another. Many churches were already online from the

modest church website to full-blown internationally telecast services delivered by satellite backed up with corporate-like social media presences. For many churches, though, having to connect with their isolated members and wider communities has required them to engage imaginatively with new skills. One side effect I’ve noticed has been a necessary decentralization of authority structures around the worship service and the corresponding empowerment of those outside of those authoritative cohorts. This is seen particularly in the entrusting to young people, women, children, and others who have the energy, enthusiasm, and skills needed in this environment of key parts of the production, coordination, and delivery of worship services. For some in leadership, this might be the catalyst they’ve dreamed of, getting more of the church involved, but for others, it might be deeply unsettling as they become increasingly side lined or perceived as less relevant. Moreover, for those worried about retaining church membership or concerned about particular doctrine, the sudden plethora of churches all showing their wares online will be deeply unsettling, as their members might discover what goes on outside of their regular church ecosystem and have an appropriate moment to leave.

Creativity is further being expressed by the distanced, isolated church in rhythms of everyday life. Again, my intuition is that with the church community scattered to their homes, a new energy has been injected into many local pastoral care networks. Contact details are updated for church members and the families, members are connected to others in the church for regular prayer and pastoral check-ins, and a much stronger awareness of who has access to and the skills to use information technology for everyday tasks is developing.



## The Distanced Church

Moreover, this home-based focus is pushing churches to be more intentional in resourcing people outside of regular church gatherings and to examine what are healthy rhythms of everyday life that attend to spiritual, physical, emotional, and mental needs shaped by a common life during isolation. Common elements identified from churches all around the world sharing their own weekly rhythms include regular online morning and evening prayers, musical worship — streamed or interactive — throughout the week, daily activities for children, taking regular “Sabbath” breaks from news and digital media, intentionally eating meals together as a household, spending time in prayer and contemplation, help for working from home, shared reading of the Bible, encouraging responsible contact with neighbors, and making people available to provide all manner of support. While not forming the kinds of rhythms that a monastic rule might have, the presence of these regular rhythms can provide much-needed stability and comfort in a world of confusion and anxiety.

### Concluding Thoughts

The shift to be a distanced church and community in many parts of the world in the face of COVID-19 has been sudden and disruptive. The response of church communities has been driven in the first instance by pragmatism, but increasingly, signs of creativity, empowerment of different members of these communities, and attention to rhythms of life are beginning to emerge. The challenge for the churches will be to nurture these new developments in ways that are sustainable and life giving for the church and the world in the current situation and into the years after it.

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## New Media and a New Reformation?

Angela Williams Gorrell

*The participatory nature of the new media landscape presents both challenges and possibilities for churches.*

I have been incredibly moved by the efforts of pastors during the COVID-19 pandemic. Witnessing church leaders saying the words of inspiration during a Zoom gathering and partnering with other organizations in their community in order to support people during this unprecedented, difficult time has been quite extraordinary. Likewise, I am grateful for the pastoral care that is being provided and the prayers and sermons of hope that are being shared.

At the same time, it has become increasingly clear to me that this pandemic has only intensified the need for church leaders to make changes that demonstrate the ability to do genuine Christian religious education and formation in our ever-changing new media landscape.

### Participatory Culture

One of the most interesting and fundamental characteristics of the new media landscape is that it is *participatory* in nature. Henry Jenkins coined the term “participatory culture” in his first book, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (Jenkins, 1992). Jenkins defined characteristics of participatory culture and its challenges, specifically noting that it has dynamic, interactive qualities (Jenkins, 2009, pp. 5-6). In other words, the kinds of things that draw people to digital spaces and motivate them to use digital tools are opportunities for active and communal engagement, creating, sharing, mentorship,

belonging, and relationship (Gorrell, 2019, p. 67). The participatory nature of digital spaces and tools presents both challenges and opportunities for churches.

### Challenges

In following multiple churches online, it seems that most leaders are merely preaching and praying from pulpits in empty buildings or their homes. Rather than exploring new methods of worship or putting people into groups and empowering multiple people to lead and encouraging meaningful interaction, most Christian leaders are just trying to do what they normally do — the only difference being filming it or doing it on Facebook Live. However, as a Christian who is experiencing information overload, is desperate for meaningful connection, and is looking for ways to live out my faith during this time — as well as being someone who recognizes the formative capacities of new media’s participatory culture, especially what constitutes genuine Christian religious education — it truly feels like not utilizing time online to experiment with new ways of doing and being the church is a significant loss.

The major challenge for Christian leaders who nurture learning communities and oversee genuine Christian education and formation in this new media landscape is making shifts in worship services and other aspects of the community’s life together so that they become more participatory. That is, not just designing worship services (and other experiences) in a top-down manner where hand-selected people disseminate information but focusing on cultivating a Christian learning community that invites people into meaningful action and reflection, dialogue, creation, mentoring relationships, and meaningful conversation.

Another challenge is for Christian religious educators to see their work and the practice of

Christian faith as involving both physical and digital spaces, both in-person and mediated communication. It is important that pastors and other types of Christian religious educators become committed to *hybrid* ministry and teaching *hybrid* faithful living — ministry and living out faith that occurs in church buildings and online (Gorrell, 2019, pp. 50-52, 108). There are limits to digital tools, and certainly forms of social media use can adversely affect users' well-being, but it is essential for church leaders to begin to ask for God's guidance in discerning what it means to do ministry and to live faithfully in a new media participatory culture.

### **Possibilities**

Recently, I was on a video conference call with Josh in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, and Lyndsey in Los Angeles. Both of them are outstanding leaders and powerful speakers who work at World Vision. I joined the call from Waco, Texas. We were talking about a new project they are working on related to gathering Christian leaders online and putting them into small groups to learn from one another and to support each other. I was instantly inspired by the conversation. At one point, Josh mentioned how this time of physical distancing might nurture a new *reformation* in the church. The thought immediately resonated with me and it was hard to contain the energy that the sentence gave to me. Of course, a new reformation could look like many different things.

From my perspective, it could look like transforming Christian religious education. One promising possibility of having to take church online is that church leaders can experiment with more participatory forms of Christian religious education. Not only does active engagement in a learning community align with the nature of new media and their participatory culture, but it also would mean Christian

religious educators embracing best practices in teaching and learning, as well as deepening a community's welcome and practice of love (Freire, 1970; Palmer, 1993; Hooks, 1994). Making Christian religious education more participatory is not just a matter of modifying technique or simply an effort to make it more compelling though; rather, it entails inviting people into new modes of embodying faith, attending to God's presence, and making sense of Jesus' life and the complexities of our own human lives through storytelling and dialogue. Therefore, it would ultimately encourage new ways of being in the world and living toward Christian visions of flourishing life (Volf & Croasmun, 2019). The kind of experimentation and imagining I am envisioning requires Christian leaders to ask an important question: "God, what are you up to in this new media landscape?" (Branson, 2016; Roxburgh, 2015; Gorrell, 2019, pp. 33-35). Asked another way, ministers might pray, "God, how might you be ushering us into a new reformation?"

How we teach and pursue Christian faith deeply and profoundly shapes how it is lived. While the participatory nature of new media culture presents challenges for churches, the possibilities it also grants could make way for a new life-giving reformation. It is quite stirring to even imagine it.

**Angela Gorrell** is the author of *Always On: Practicing Faith in a New Media Landscape*. She gives lectures and leads workshops on social media, innovative and participatory education, and joy and Christian visions of the good life. She can be contacted through her website ([www.angelagorrell.com](http://www.angelagorrell.com)).

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**Pastors in 2010**  
**"Facebook is from the devil!"**



**2020**  
**"Follow our LIVE services"**



**What Can the History of Digital Religion Teach  
the Newly-Online Churches of Today?**

Tim Hutchings

The church is already online, with 35 years of experience in building long-distance communities of prayer and worship.

The COVID-19 pandemic has provoked a global surge in the digitization of religion. As places of worship have closed and events and festivals have been cancelled, religious communities have turned instead to online alternatives: livestreams on Facebook, video sermons on YouTube, family prayers via Zoom and sacred sites recreated in virtual reality.

This shift has been dramatic, but it is certainly not new. My own research has followed online churches since the early 2000s, and the first computer-mediated worship events were recorded in the 1980s. Over thirty-five years, online churches have been driven by three common ambitions: the desire to *amplify*, to *connect* and to *experiment*.

*Amplification* is the broadcasting of a central voice, using digital media to expand the reach of a preacher's message and reach new audiences. *Connection* is the use of digital media to overcome isolation by forming new communities. Very liberal or conservative Christians may feel unwelcome in their local churches, but find support for their ideas online. Disabled Christians and those with limited mobility may also be unable to participate fully in local events, and online resources have given them new opportunities to become leaders of the global church. Finally, many online churches have been driven by a love of *experimentation*: excited by the novelty of a new medium, the chance to create new

kinds of ritual, and the opportunity to reflect theologically on the potential of a new digital culture.

Twenty years ago, at the dawn of research on religion and digital media, Christopher Helland observed two categories of activity: *religion online*, which tried to translate the traditional messages of religious institutions into the new environment without undermining old ideas and hierarchies, and *online religion*, which allowed new practices and social structures to emerge within digital culture. In my own writing, I have argued that the last ten years of Christian digital worship show a steady move from the second type back to the first. To paraphrase Helland, the attention of Christian denominations has moved from "*online church*" to "*church online*".

In the early 2000s, *experimentation* was a key motive. Institutions like the Methodist Council and the Church of England were willing to invest time and money in projects like Church of Fools, a small, short-term virtual world designed to discover what kinds of Christian activity might be possible in digital spaces. By the late 2000s, energy had shifted to *amplification*, using digital and social media to boost the messages of established religious leaders. Instead of learning from their own early experiments, churches began forming collaborations with major platforms like Facebook and Twitter, developing digital strategies that were largely indistinguishable from commercial marketing campaigns.

In the wake of the pandemic, we have seen many churches continue this turn to *amplification*, using livestreams and videos to continue the work of preaching and prayer. Amplification is a powerful use of digital media, but the long experience of online churches shows that this alone cannot be sufficient to maintain a community. Digital communication

can be used to support friendships, exchange emotional and material support and build a sense of belonging – the motive of *connection* identified above. In this time of social distancing, mediating connection is more essential than ever.

Churches are also beginning to *experiment* again, creating new liturgies, rituals and prayers for a new kind of crisis. These may be digital – like the virtual “Choir of the Nation” launched by St Paul’s Cathedral in London – or resolutely low-technology, like the simple act of lighting a candle at home. Churches need to find ways to ensure that every member of their congregation and wider community feels engaged in the shared work of prayer and worship, including those who cannot yet access digital networks, and simple home-based rituals are part of the answer.

We are also seeing signs of new experiments in digital theology, restarting, for example, the very old argument over the acceptability of online communion. The closing of church buildings requires new thinking in the theology of place and presence. Most importantly, the new class of “essential workers” maintaining our health services, food supplies and infrastructure call for new attention to the theologies of work, sacrifice and social justice.

One of the most important challenges facing churches today is their response to death. Some of the earliest acts of online worship in the 1980s were organized in response to tragedy. Death has always been an engine of innovation in religion and media, because the experience of grief shakes our sense of what is real, normal and necessary and opens a horizon of new possibilities. As human beings come to terms with loss, we seek ways to continue and reinforce our bonds with the dead as well as the living. Mourners have often turned to new media to do so, from spirit photography in the

19<sup>th</sup> century to social media messages to heaven today. One of the most painful consequences of the pandemic has been the discovery that pastors and even families cannot visit the dying or organize large-scale funerals. Churches must find new ways to mark grief and support the bereaved in this context. Part of the answer has been amplification, for example by using livestreaming to broadcast funerals to an audience who cannot attend. As the pandemic wears on, however, we will find an increasing need for connection and experimentation. Christians and their churches will need to invent new practices and rituals to stay connected with the bereaved, to help process our grief, and mark our losses as a community and a society.

I invite the reader to see this short essay as a message of hope and encouragement. In the depths of this crisis, academic researchers of religion and media can reassure Christians and their churches that the challenges they face are not all new. Digital communities have flourished for decades in spite of distance, by pursuing the three goals of amplification, connection and experimentation. They can do so again today.

**Tim Hutchings** is a sociologist of digital religion. His research into online churches began in 2006, and was published as *Creating Church Online* (Routledge, 2017). He has also studied Bible apps and games, digital expressions of grief, and religious media ethics. He is the editor-in-chief of the journal *Religion, Media and Digital Culture* (Brill).

I don't care who your old man is,  
this gathering is illegal



-22-

***An Inclusive Church Community in a Digital Age***

Bex Lewis

*The COVID-19 pandemic has caused churches to use digital technologies in a way that many have never done before. How can they learn from this to become a more inclusive church for the future?*

The COVID-19 pandemic has left churches in an interesting place around the purpose and function of digital space(s). In the last ten years, many churches have improved their online presence with functional and aesthetically pleasing websites, recognizing that this is effectively the “front door” to their church (<https://www.premierdigital.info/awards>). Some, especially smaller churches, struggle, while others feel the pressure to try and do everything at once, despite lacking the requisite digital literacy. The pandemic appears to have pushed many to seek to put the Sunday service online at short notice, whether by YouTube, livestreaming, or via interactive platforms such as Zoom or Skype. Universities have had to do similar with moving their teaching online, and those attempting this need to take encouragement from the fact that an Open University lecturer tweeted that it takes six staff and around eighteen months to prepare a course for fully online teaching.

Having run workshops for most major Christian denominations in the UK, with the most popular course being “Social Media for the Scared,” I would typically start with much less ambitious plans, asking questions about what the purpose of any activity was, and building up confidence in whatever platform was fit for

that purpose. (Not all platforms are created equal.) Putting whatever content is the easiest and most manageable online is to be applauded in a crisis, but I hope that churches, having had a taste of the digital, will start to think much more about what else they should consider. There has always been resistance to online forms of church, with fears that it will replace face to face, but the digital offers possibilities and limits that are different from offline church, rather than its replacement.

As Livingstone says, “Even though ...face-to-face communication can... be angry, negligent, resistant, deceitful and inflexible, somehow it remains the ideal against which mediated communication is judged as flawed” (Livingstone, 2009). Hutchings’s (2017) research identifies a wide range of different expressions of church online. I would encourage ministries to think what their church looks like, beyond the building and beyond the Sunday sermon, and how wider inclusion may be made possible through digital means. As Smith (2015) says, “to be incarnational we need to meet people, where they are,” and that, for many, is online.

Access to online content and interaction is 24/7, and faith is also a 24/7 matter. In 2010 I developed the concept of the #digidisciple for The Big Bible Project (<http://archive.bigbible.uk/>). Beyond Sunday, disciples seek to follow Jesus and grow in their faith in Christ through the Bible, worship, prayer, service, and Christian living, taking our Christian presence seriously both online and offline and considering whether we live by the same values in both “spaces.” A #digidisciple is someone who seeks to live out their biblically-informed Christian faith online, whether dipping their toes in, or fully immersing themselves in the increasingly mobile and interactive nature of the digital space. Byers argues that if we are “the means by which God

communicates and reveals himself through his Spirit, then our [online content] should be products of a life transformed by Christ and indwelled by his Spirit” (2013), not that this means 24/7 broadcasting Bible messages!

In this time of the coronavirus crisis, more need to think how we will move the focus beyond the Sunday service to the 24/7 space of digital discipleship. It’s easy for the Sunday service to become the focus and to become a “performance” online or offline. It is true that problems with the platform, or poor-quality communication or graphics can become a barrier to the message, but at times, online or offline, an overfocus on performance, individually or corporately, can remove attention from the message itself, or from the relationships we seek to build in faith communities (Lewis, 2018). Online content can be harder to concentrate on, so keep any broadcasts short, as Vaughan Park Chapel (where I’m writing this) has been doing (<https://www.instagram.com/vaughanparkchapel/>). There’s been a focus on getting back inside the building from some ministers, and though these are sacred, even “thin” spaces, for others buildings have been a barrier for many years. The digital offers new opportunities to connect and engage: Anecdotal stories are already emerging of larger numbers attending streaming services than offline services.

In 2001-2002 I undertook a project on accessibility and usability online. Within the Big Bible Project, we engaged a range of voices from the pew, the pulpit, and the academy, including those who found accessing physical church a challenge. Listening to the stories of others really opened my eyes. Little did I know that in 2017, I would be diagnosed with breast cancer (and incurable metastatic cancer in 2019) and would find that face-to-face church was a huge challenge, both physically — with



an impaired immune system from the chemotherapy and other treatments — and mentally. Unable to attend church, 24/7 connection with friends online, including spiritual and mental support, became key, overflowing into practical support — social media meant that people knew what was needed. The “body of Christ has cancer” (and other chronic illnesses), and we need to think how and if the digital offers us opportunities to be more inclusive (Lewis, 2019). As Thompson writes, faith communities can better utilize technology to be “the body of Christ to those who are hurting,” whilst also being aware of its limits (Thompson, 2016).

During the current pandemic, Bowler, a religious scholar, is sharing daily Instagram posts about what she has learned from dealing with cancer as it applies to the current situation, demonstrating a vulnerability as she walks alongside us (Bowler, 2020). Tanya Marlow, who has long-term experience of living with isolation, has also been sharing much wisdom (Barlow, 2020).

I would like to encourage churches to think about the values that they hold, listen to their congregations (current and those who they would like to connect with), and think about what lessons they will take from the current crisis about how they may do church, on a Sunday, and as a community during the rest of the week, and how they might make the most of the opportunities that digital media may present. As Rev. Sara Batts-Neale says, you need to know when digital is the right space to use, such as a quick message, and when a cup of tea is the right thing, when you have more time. Digital is a 24/7 interactive space, so think how the whole community can support each other 24/7 through a blend of digital and physical interactions.

**Dr. Bex Lewis** is passionate about helping people engage with the digital world in a positive way, a field in which she has more than 20 years of experience. She has written on digital discipleship, children in a digital age, and the official history of Keep Calm and Carry On.

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### ***Hope-Storytelling in the Age of Corona: How Pastors Foster the Community of Faith***

Ilona Nord and Swantje Luthe

*This essay focuses on fostering the “priesthood of all believers” while church is going online.*

#### **Observations on the Effects of Corona on the Actions of the Church**

The measures adopted against the coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2 and COVID-19) also affected church life in Germany at an early stage. Our first impression was that reactions of individual church congregations throughout the country can be categorized according to the keywords “consolation” and “hope: “Large banners printed with Bible verses hang on churches, sermons are shared via digital media, and that is only the beginning. From our point of view, it is noticeable that individual pastors in particular stand out. This creates the image of a church that publicly presents the officials, the clergy, as representatives in faith, at least in the media. For many pastors who are celebrating a YouTube service for the first time, it seems to be easiest to imitate the view of the church with the camera, to film devotions or services as if the rows were filled with church members. The worship room, which is closed for visitors, is opened virtually.

Despite this, the pastors are still present in the “holy” room, which is at the same time forbidden for the congregation. Some pastors seem to be literally rebelling against corona, against the virus that threatens the church and prevents it from praising God. If this perception is sharpened, some stylistic blunders appear: The solitary, holy recitation of the biblical texts is in a certain way a call to give power to a world that is opposed, namely the world of

faith. However, there are also other voices. They show a more pastoral habitus, which wants to take away fears of a proliferation of massive deaths, especially among the elderly and the aged. There are prominent voices in Germany that criticize the strict ban on assembly in churches for reasons of counseling (Käßmann, 2020). The impression arises that many pastors lapse into a kind of information mode. They seem to be less interested in mediated interaction, but instead communicate one to many. In return, authority is generated through the ministry; an almost ministerial identity emerges. The pastors act, so to speak, as a sequel to such statements as the joint press release of the Catholic Bishops' Conference, the Council of the Protestant Church in Germany and the Orthodox Bishops' Conference (Bätzing, Heinrich-Bedford-Strohm, & Augoustinos, 2020).

According to Protestant and especially Lutheran understanding, the priesthood of all believers is a normative criterion for any form of preaching. "This means that not a particular ministry, but faith alone qualifies a person for pastoral witness; every Christian person can pass on the Word of God and pray for others" (Karle, 2020, p. 135). Pastors are distinguished, strictly speaking, by only one thing in the congregation: the function they have assumed for the congregation. "The pastoral ministry is the professional concretion of the one preaching ministry and the one priesthood that all Christians share with one another" (Karle, 2020, p. 136). In our opinion, the most important function of pastors at present is to ensure that they *share* this ministry with Christians as effectively as possible.

**Research Findings: Mediatization and Church**  
Church online during the coronavirus pandemic mainly includes being active in social media formats, including both institutional communications and personal communications

between individual Christians. But both are based on reciprocity (Nord/Palkowitsch-Kühl, 2020; Luthe, 2016). In our view, one-to-many communication hardly ever reaches resonance here, because people are not only consumers of (digital) offers, neither online nor offline. They are, at the same time, producers and co-constructors (prosumers) of their relationships to themselves and to the world, as well as their modes of representation in the game of networked discourse communities. When churches now go online in the field of social media, they should clearly encourage interaction. One way to do this is not just to put pastors and bishops in the limelight, but also to ensure that all religious professions (religious education teachers and church musicians), together with volunteers, work visibly together within the church to give impulses for a lively, active and plurilogically communicating faith community.

Pastoral Care gains the insight into how elementarily important it is to help people become subjects of their own life story (*empowerment*). Especially in times of crisis, hope arises where people actively cooperate and promote issues for themselves and others (*agency*). Many examples already show that these can be in the form of contributions to worship or everyday life, which are located within or outside church congregations in community networks. It is not uncommon for this to happen in such a way that religious beliefs are passed on and reflected upon. Here people become theological prosumers (cf. Schlag/Suhner, 2020; Müller, 2020).

**#EasterStones #ConqueringDeath  
#HoardingHope**

In search of an example for what we have described above, we chose the campaign Easter Stones from the Protestant Church in Northern Germany. Two female pastors gave the idea for

people from the congregation to paint stones with pictures or colors of hope during the Passion time until Easter. Then they put the stones out in the city or surrounding area so that someone else could find them. The finders in turn post with the hashtags #ostersteine (#easterstones) #staerkersdertod (#conqueringdeath) #hoffnungshamstern (#hoardinghope) via social media, in Facebook, especially in the public group “Ostersteine” (“Easter Stones”). The Easter message is brought *offline* and *online* into the current crisis experience. Meanwhile, people from all over Germany participate in this so-called hybrid communication project, sharing their findings with other people using the named hashtags.

### **Crisis-effective Hope-storytelling of a Living Faith Community**

The church is a (worldwide effective) institution, it is an organization, and it is also a worshipping assembly. Last but not least, it is also a movement that participates in local, regional, national, and global activities. Precisely because the coronavirus is a pandemic that challenges all dimensions of social and political action, the church is therefore also important in all four dimensions, in and for the various dimensions of public life. In social media, these different dimensions can be adapted in communications without great effort. This also applies, for example, to the campaign Easter Stones. It creates resonance as well as reciprocity, not only with simple “likes.” Empirical research, for example, by using vignettes, could focus here on individual coping strategies in times of crisis.

Heidi Campbell (2013) has provided an insightful exploration of how religion can be described online using the categories authority, authenticity, identity, community, and ritual. #Hoardinghope shows this in an exemplary way: It is the theological competence of two pastors that leads to motivating the impulse to

the stones of hope. They give a high authority to the word of the resurrection. All those who participate personally embrace this hope (*identity*), adapting and redefining the Christian message by finding their own expression for it (*authenticity*). They do not keep the stone for themselves, but offer it; they communicate their hope in analogue and digital form. Social media visualize this process. They show immersion effects for the creation of community (*community*), and not only online or offline. The question of whether communication takes place online or offline is no longer important here, because *empowerment* and *enablement* (Domsgen, 2019) permeate both realities of life.

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**Enabling, Extending, and Disrupting Religion in  
the Early COVID-19 Crisis**

Peter Phillips

*This essay explores different approaches to the digitalization of church worship and engagement during the COVID-19 crisis, proposing three different patterns: enabling, extending, and disrupting, and compares this to Helland's discourse about religion online and online religion.*

The COVID-19 crisis has evidently made a huge difference to the church in the locked-down countries spreading round the globe. Beginning in China and Hong Kong, moving on to Singapore and Africa and then Australasia, Europe, and the Americas, church buildings have been closed for worship (despite some resistance in countries like the USA and Russia). This has led to a flourishing of online spirituality and livestreamed worship/prayer services and Seders by Zoom. In the UK, this process has been documented through a number of auto-ethnographic posts from vicars, ministers, and rabbis on social media. Pages like Premier Digital's Facebook page, which I have had a hand in managing since the crisis began and in nascent data-centered research projects like the one on "The Rise of the Digital Church" at Durham University led by Professors Pete Ward (Ecclesiology and Ethnography Network), Alexandra Cristea (Computer Science), and myself (Theology and Religion), are already collecting Twitter data on the COVID-19 crisis' impact on online religion which can be analyzed later. I have also published a number of blog posts on the Premier Digital Facebook page (<https://www.premierdigital.info/blog/>) and two posts on Medium (Phillips, [2020a](#), [2020b](#)), the second of which captures a number of papers published on online communion over

the last few weeks – again ranging from Hong Kong to the Americas.

In my own work on the Bible and digitality (Phillips, 2019), I reference the early days of the study of digital religion, Chris Helland (2012) made the important distinction between religion online and online religion. The former sought to replicate and promote offline religion through digital means. Digital engagement was an advertisement of what happened offline and the theological locus for God's activity was in physical space, be that in a church, mosque, temple, or synagogue. Indeed, the model takes on the thoroughly centripetal, attractional model of church-led missions – "come to us." Such worship was the first port of call for those faced with livestreaming in the UK – a shift towards broadcasting normal acts of worship (be it a praise meeting or a mass) but without a congregation in the building. These services tended to be filmed in church, broadcast from church, with the church building as a locus of the worship, reinforcing the idea that this is where God can only be worshipped and playing into the model of worship as entertainment or instruction for the public now made available through the broadcast media. The congregation were not partners in the worship experience but consumers of a worship experience with many watching on the very same devices that fed them their regular diet of Netflix, iPlayer, and Amazon Prime Video. This shift from offline worship to mediatized worship was not a shift to online worship but rather offline religion advertising/broadcasting its continual presence in a media-rich format now available through online devices.

Helland's second category was online religion. For the most part, this developed later. Online religion is the promotion of religious ritual activity online without a necessarily analogue version lying behind it. We have seen good examples of this in online ministries historically

such as the Anglican Cathedral of Second Life, St. Pixels, i-Church (all studied in Tim Hutchings' *Creating Church Online*, 2017), and more lately in the UK in [SanctuaryFirst](#), [Disability and Jesus](#) and [D-Church](#) – all models of different aspects of online spiritual activity which are not based in a specific church location. But perhaps this online religion is also seen in the large number of sites dedicated to the Veneration of the Blessed Sacrament or in online pilgrimages.

These last expressions show the essential hybridity of this model. Online activity requires offline organization and delivery. There is little (or nothing?) in the way of truly native online worship, because the internet itself is a thoroughly embodied environment, by definition a place where enfleshed humans explore/experience/engage with information and experiences displayed/coded/assembled by other enfleshed humans. So, what makes such an experience online religion rather than digitally mediatized religion online? The crucial point is that for online religion, the encounter with the divine/the beyond happens online rather than participants viewing *online* a religious experience happening *offline*. Religion online means that the religious encounter is online. God is found, not just in the physical expression of church, mosque, temple, synagogue, but in the very experience of searching for God online. God inhabits the digital.

Indeed, in the more strict regime of the second week of the lockdown in the UK, when church buildings were closed to both the public and the clergy, and after several blogs and calls for more communitarianism in the livestreaming, a number of well-known religious figures who were offering livestreamed daily prayer services began to explore ritualistic activity online: the use of silence, the use of responses, the use of Facebook Live comments as prayers floating up the screen, of Lovefeasts with cake and water,

of presenters breaking the fourth wall and gazing down to the camera lens to connect. The screen was no longer the place where people only *consumed* religion but rather where they actually *experienced/engaged with/were drawn into* religious activity, where they took an active part in the devotion itself.

Moreover, in the third week, a number of churches (but by no means all) began to shift from a rejection of online communion (the celebration of the Eucharist/Lord's Supper mediated by digital technology) towards a (sometimes begrudging) acceptance of online communion as a necessary way to serve congregations in social-isolation. Of course, such a process was preceded by a number of theological reflections noted and evidenced in my piece published on Medium (Phillips, 2020b). In a way, religion online seemed to have made a huge stride forward when a number of major denominations across the world are now accepting that what is probably the central ritual act/sacrament of the Christian faith could be shared online by people not in proximate physical space with other members of their congregation. As Debbie Herring noted in one of the earlier studies on online communion (Herring, 2008, p. 36):

A worship life without the practice of sacraments in their traditional form is incomplete, and that if worship online is to reflect the fullness of human experience, then we have to confront the need for sacraments in cyberspace, and wrestle with the issues this presents.

The shift over these first three weeks resembles a different pattern than Chris Helland's dyad. Instead, it may well be that it maps the way in which digital disruption happens in industry through enabling, extending, and then disrupting. So, Uber and Deliveroo, for

example, first enable existing businesses to do their work by providing a subsidiary service (extra cabs, getting food delivered), but then the businesses extend their offer to go beyond what the original industry was offering – free rides, restaurant food delivery. In the final stage, the digital businesses begin to seriously disrupt the original industry by overwhelming numbers or taking on aspects they had in the beginning only enabled – so, for example, the rise of takeaway cooking factories in London to support the delivery industry. But the shift in the church has happened on all three levels at the same time – broadcasting/enabling normative patterns of physical church have persisted in the mainline denominations; extending into hybrid forms of online/offline church has persisted; and disruption models have existed from the start. Often, these patterns are associated with authority, ecclesiology, and social integration with digital technology rather than as a process of development across the spectrum.

What we have seen in online religion in the early weeks of the COVID-19 lockdown in the UK is a synchronous/hybridised mix of these three elements:

1. Enabling offline church by services going online – mostly providing the broadcasting of an existing product, such as the Archbishop's National Service, replicated in lots of local broadcasts of local service.
2. Extending offline church by providing engagement online through household services and Zoom congregations, as well as community developments such as virtual coffee shops and prayer stations (see <http://sanctuaryfirst.org.uk>), creating online-focussed spirituality such as praying Daily Offices and Lovefeasts, celebrating masses online and recommending Spiritual Communion (the spiritual reception of the blessing of the

sacrament despite not physically eating/drinking the bread and wine) – an offline service with an online (purposefully non-physical) experience.

3. Beginning the process of disruption through discussions about and celebrations of online communion and the hints of greater congregation sizes through data analysis of Facebook views, this disruption moves from groups supporting disabled access to offline church but also creating a new community online and advocating such disabled churches are more inclusive than physical expressions of church (for example, [Disability and Jesus](#)).

As some denominations (UMC, PCUSA, URC-UK, MCI) (Phillips, 2020b) have now begun to embrace online communion, we may well see the disruption mode increase as both the lockdown and the COVID-19 crisis create a new normal for online religion. In turn, this may help us engage more if the COVID-19 crisis heralds in its own new normal of quarantined existence for humanity.

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***The (Re)Discovery of the Digital Environment for Living and Communicating the Faith***

Moisés Sbardelotto

Faced with this “sign of the times” in the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to reflect on two issues that affect theological and ecclesiological aspects of the relationship between the churches and the digital environment: the notions of communication and community.

**Introduction**

In these times of isolation and lockdown, religions, in their various expressions, are challenged to rethink their faith practices and their communication styles. Faced with the closing of temples and churches in many countries, religions turn their attention mainly to digital networks to maintain contact with their faithful.

Thus, we can see even more clearly now a process of “mediamorphosis of faith” in a time of mediatization of religion, in which “new modalities of perception and expression of religious beliefs and practices begin to arise in the digital environment, thanks to the publicizing of religious elements and the accessibility to such elements by numerous inter-agents, everywhere and at any time” (Sbardelotto, 2016, p. 250).

On the part of religious institutions, however, there are often hasty approaches or fearsome distancing from the digital environment. In the case of Christianity, to which I will make reference here, this makes it difficult for ministry action to “incarnate” itself with more depth in the emerging culture. For this reason, it is important to reflect on some communication issues that arise in the face of this “sign of the times,” in the pandemic and its

effects on the theological and ecclesiological aspects of the relationship between the churches and the digital environment. I will highlight two of them, which demand new significations: the notions of *communication* and *community*. On the internet, these experiences are lived in innovative ways, and therefore, the way they are thought about and enunciated also needs to be problematized.

### **Communication and Relationship, not just Transmission or Exhibition**

Prior to the unprecedented notion of closed temples worldwide in a true “liturgical lockdown,” the almost automatic response of countless religious groups was to promote more transmissions of their rites or other religious moments on the internet in order to overcome isolation and shorten distances.

The potentialities of the digital, however, can bring with them some risks to the life of faith. With the eagerness to transmit celebrations, there is a risk of transforming the rites into mere spectacles, in a “*mise en scène*” to be exhibited. For Christianity, there is also often a certain “media clericalism,” if not even a “clericalist exhibitionism,” in which all the networked communication revolves around the clergyman.

The risk is that we will forget that there is a *person* on the other side of the screen. Thus, this other person is often considered as a mere passive “spectator,” objectified as an additional “number” to be counted by the audience and viewing rates. Churches seek a connection, but often avoid or dispense *contact*. The risk, in short, is to ignore the “other” in his/her humanity.

More than a narrow focus on transmission, it is necessary to take into account the communicational and interactional process that is established in the digital environment. This

does not mean underestimating the technical quality of transmission. On the contrary, this is essential to help the faithful live the rite and experience the sacred. However, even more important is to make it possible to build networked interpersonal relationships and not just gather “people to listen” or “people to see.” Everything that the churches do in a digital network must consider the “face” of the person with whom they communicate, his/her joys and hopes, sadness and anguishes, in order to establish a *humanized and humanizing relationship with human persons*.

“To communicate is to communicate myself around the significant meaning. Thus, in communication, there are no passive subjects” (Freire, 2011, p. 8, author’s translation). Translating this into a religious language, the “significant meaning” is the sacred itself, which calls the assembly which gathers around it. In the relation with a “You” (whom we call God) and with a “you” (the people with whom the religious experience is shared), there are no passive subjects. Everyone co-participates in this relationship, not only “communicating contents,” but, in fact, “communicating themselves.” It is not just a matter of “transmitting” information, but “an encounter of interlocutors who seek the signification of meanings” (Freire, 2011, p. 91, author’s translation) — that is, who seek to give meaning to life and unravel its mysteries – and, mainly, “the Mystery.” Therefore, it is better to avoid advancing technologically if it means receding theologically and ecclesially, due to a lack of discernment.

### **Networked Communities, not just a Connection of Individuals**

In this period of social isolation, the relationship with the brothers and sisters on the journey of faith also gains a new importance. In a digital network, people create and *invent* experiences of sharing and

communicating the faith. It is a time to recognize even more strongly that the involvement in an online community “augments and is in addition to, rather than a replacement for, an embodied, offline worship experience” (Campbell & Garner, 2016, p. 67).

However, a community is more than just a congregation of individuals or “connected individuals.” On the contrary, it is mainly a “network of solidarity [that] requires mutual listening and dialogue, based on the responsible use of language” (Francis, 2019, The metaphors of the net and community section, para. 4). And this period of social isolation especially “calls on all of us to invest in relationships and to affirm the interpersonal nature of our humanity, including in and through the network” (Francis, 2019, We are members one of another section, para. 5).

In the past century, Christian churches in Latin America offered the world one of the main fruits of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, the base ecclesial communities (BECs). They were “another way of being Church, based on the axis of the Word and the lay person” (Boff, 1977, p. 10, author’s translation). Today, following this trail, we could say that we are facing the emergence of *digital ecclesial communities (or DEC)s*, which often go beyond spatiotemporal or cultural-ethnic configurations of local religious structures (groups, parishes, dioceses, etc.).

They update, with other “means” and in other “environments,” the same search and need for religious experience and interpersonal bonds. The DEC)s, as well as the historical BECs, point to a “new-not-yet-experienced” ecclesiality amidst the historical variations of the Church’s community forms.

In view of this, it is important that religious institutions and their authorities seek – also in

relation to historical BECs – “to respect the path that was inaugurated; not wanting to immediately frame the phenomenon with theological-pastoral categories born from other contexts and other ecclesial experiences; put themselves in an attitude of someone who wants to see, comprehend and learn; maintain critical vigilance to be able to discern true from false paths” (Boff, 1977, p. 10, author’s translation).

In these weeks or months when many “stone churches” will be closed, the main objective of a ministry in the digital environment is precisely to strengthen relations with flesh-and-blood people connected in a digital network. And, with them, form a *community* from the *common* that unites them, collaborating in the construction of the Christian *communion* that is the Church, in a truly and profoundly *communicational* action.

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### **404 Error: The Digital Literacy Page Cannot Be Found**

Katherine G. Schmidt

*Despite recommendations for media training in 2002, American Catholic church leaders have yet to implement such training into pastoral formation.*

Some masses are better than others. This has always been true, but the global pandemic in 2020 gave it a new dimension: some virtual masses are better than others. Faced with the somewhat sudden suspension of masses in many dioceses, pastors and lay ministers scrambled to deliver virtual ministries to their socially-distant parishioners. For some parishes, the transition was simple, given that they had been livestreaming or recording masses before the pandemic. For most, however, the transition was more complicated. Some transitions were better than others.

One gets the sense that many, many pastors were caught off guard and were relatively unable to navigate digital spaces with the degree of comfort now required of them. The pandemic has had a revelatory power on both the national and global scale, and it has revealed much for the Church as well.

Parish priests are not media moguls, nor should they be. But one wonders why the switch to online ministries should be fraught with so much anxiety, given how many years such technologies have been a regular part of greater American and global culture. More to the point ecclesially, however, one wonders why the pastoral responses in this transition should be so varied given the Church's own long-standing recommendation.

In 2002, the Pontifical Council for Social Communications (PCSC) released *The Church and Internet*. In this relatively short document, the Council expressed a measured optimism about the relationship of the Church's mission to internet technologies, at that point in their young adolescence. *The Church and Internet* (2002) demonstrates a clear understanding of the "opportunities and challenges" of the internet at the time. It also demonstrates a clarity about internet technologies that allows them to anticipate the various benefits and pitfalls that would come with social media.

The document has recommendations for all members of the Church, even "young people." But the recommendations begin with "Church leaders." The Council recommends:

People in leadership positions in all sectors of the Church need to understand the media, apply this understanding in formulating pastoral plans for social communications together with concrete policies and programs in this area, and make appropriate use of media. Where necessary, they should receive media education themselves; in fact, "the Church would be well served if more of those who hold offices and perform functions in her name received communication training" (Pontifical Council for Social Communications, 2002).

Here, the Council quotes two of its other documents, *Aetatis Novae* (1992) and *Ethics in Communications* (2000). One thus gets the sense that their recommendations are not simply one-time musings on a fleeting cultural moment. They quote Pope John Paul II from his World Communications Day speech in 1990, saying that "Church leaders are obliged to use 'the full potential of the computer age to serve

the human and transcendent vocation of every person, and thus to give glory to the Father from whom all good things come'" (John Paul II, 1990). *The Church and Internet* goes on to make the specific recommendation that, priests, deacons, and religious and lay pastoral workers should have media education to increase their understanding of the impact of social communications on individuals and society and help them acquire a manner of communicating that speaks to the sensibilities and interests of people in a media culture. Today, this clearly includes training regarding the internet, including how to use it in their work (Pontifical Council for Social Communications, 2002).

I read this part of the document very closely with my undergraduate students before we do an analysis of parish websites. I do not select the parishes ahead of time, and I usually ask students to volunteer the names of local parishes they know. Without fail, we come upon Catholic parish websites with mass times buried (or completely hidden), broken links, and unusable pastor email addresses.

Parishes have limited budgets, and thus might not be able to hire developers for fancy websites. But general issues like broken links and poor interface are not a matter of money, they are a matter of literacy. The PCSC recommendations apply to all ministers, lay and cleric alike. However, given the relative uniformity of seminary formation, these curricula seem particularly well-suited to including the kind of basic digital literacy that is required for pastoring a parish church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In the eighteen years since *The Church and Internet* (2002), the Program of Priestly Formation issued by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has been revised twice: the fifth edition released in 2005

and the sixth to be released in 2020, after a delay (Schuth, 2016, p. 24). In the fifth and current edition, then, what do we find with regard to the training recommended by the Pontifical Council? In short, not much. The most promising mention of digital culture — of the two mentions in the 153-page document — is that seminarians should cultivate “a cultural-critical attitude that discerns the positive and negative potentials of mass communications, various forms of entertainment, and technology, such as the internet” (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006, p. 33). This “positive and negative” framework is similar to almost every ecclesial document on media and technology, but one wonders how exactly seminarians and other pastoral students are meant to cultivate a truly cultural-critical attitude. The other mention is about life in formation with regard to media: “seminarians should develop discerning habits in reading, the use of various media, the internet, and entertainment in general” (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006, p. 87). Indeed, some seminaries have policies regarding the use of social media for their pre-theologians and theologians that reflect this effort to develop discerning habits.

Casting the internet as a means of entertainment is disconcerting for two reasons. First, it gives the impression that being a pastor in the 21<sup>st</sup> century does not require that one participate in digital culture. Surely, one could minister without watching movies or television. One cannot, however, minister without being online, at least in some limited capacity. The second follows from the first: Categorizing the internet as entertainment encourages us to see it as optional or additional to ecclesial life at best, and as an obstacle to holiness at worst.

I propose that all bishops take the recommendations of the Pontifical Council seriously and implement digital literacy training

in their dioceses, particularly at the seminary level. Furthermore, I propose digital literacy training requirements *from a theological perspective*. Thankfully, the Catholic tradition is well-versed in thinking about the richness and possibilities of mediation. The Church needs to think as carefully about digital culture as it does about church history, sacramental theology, and moral theology. Digital life is not additional to modern life; it is an integral part of it. All leaders in the Church — lay and cleric alike — must be able to navigate their ministry with a critical awareness of the mediated spaces in which they are received, translated, and lived out. May we use this moment of crisis to engage digital culture “to serve the human and transcendent vocation of every person, and thus to give glory to the Father from whom all good things come” (John Paul II, 1990).

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### ***Communion in the Digital Body of Christ***

Matthew John Paul Tan

As I begin writing this, I am reminded by the

*The sacramental presence of the Body of Christ continues in the era of closed churches as the Body becomes stretched in the abstract spaces of cyberspace.*

Liturgy of the Hours — read off an app on my phone — that it is the feast day of St. Isidore of Seville, the sixth-century Bishop that was named by Pope St John Paul II in 1997 as the patron saint of the internet. I find this convergence of ancient faith and digital present rather poignant in these times of lockdown, when leaving your home is fraught with risk — of catching COVID-19, of being booked by law enforcement officers for falling outside the scope of valid reasons for leaving home, or for breaching social distancing guidelines. When the Psalms sound out through silent squares, shuttered shops, and empty train stations. Most poignantly for Christians, they would sound out along the doors of closed churches.

In earlier works, I acknowledged the importance of the church going online, as a way of reaching those standing on the sides of the information superhighway and bringing them into the feast of the church. Nevertheless, I expressed worry about the church’s penchant for acceding to the logic of going online in the name of “getting content out,” and the resultant shift in the church’s center of gravity. I argued that in the frenzy to make a digital presence for the Body of Christ, we face the risk of abstracting the church with a thinned-out conception of itself. I argued instead for an anchoring in embodied communion and for the sacramental life of the parish as the touchstone of ecclesial life. With limitations of gatherings

to two people at the time of writing, embodied communion *and* the sacramental life — baptisms, communion, confession, matrimony, and so on — are now near impossible. In their place is a new normal of livestream masses, homilies on YouTube, and the emergence of a swathe of podcasts and videos shared on social media. In this time of lockdown, what I have worried about in conference papers has become the lived norm of ecclesial life. That this would come in Lent, at the very time when such sacraments would be most sorely needed, makes a digitized feast day celebrated in isolation all the more poignant.

Instead of feeling vindicated about my worries coming true, I have realized that COVID-19 has laid bare a massive blind spot in my own posture of critique, which I now could only describe as reactionary. If what I said was true, then we face the prospect of faith withering when we are stricken from our physical connection with the sacraments. Call me stubborn, but it is not that I have realized the error of my ways of worrying about the digitization of the church. (I think the heart of my critique concerning the ecclesiological risks still stands.)

Where my blind spot lay was in thinking that the ecclesiology of embodied communion was a thicker ecclesiology, when in actual fact, it was also weak. Because I did more than privilege the embodied communion of the parish over the digital. What I also did was collapse the presence of Christ into the embodied communion and made that link the sole criterion of faith and the presence of God. While I was not aware of it at the time, the logical endpoint of my critique was that a presence with no body is no presence at all, and this applies to both my neighbor and my God.

What I also was not aware of was that in my defense of a thicker account, I had actually thinned the Body of Christ's capacity for enacting communion by other means when embodied communion is not possible. At the heart of my oversight was forgetting the patristic idea of Christ as the Divine Word, who was born of the Father before all the ages, and through whom all things were made. According to St. Bonaventure's condensing of the patristic tradition, the creation of all things through the Divine Word has left an indelible mark of God's presence in the structure of the created order, such that both the heavens and the firmament can not only declare the glory of God, but herald the presence of God's word. This is why the psalmist can ask rhetorically:

*... Where can I flee from your presence?  
If I go up to the heavens, you are there.  
If I make my bed in the depths, you are there.  
If I rise on the wings of the dawn,  
if I settle on the far side of the sea,  
even there your hand will guide me... (Ps. 139:7-10)*

In other words, the sacramental presence of the Incarnate Word — that in the bread and the wine — remains the high point of God's presence in the world, and that most intense form of sacramental presence abides in the many altars on which the Mass is celebrated in the (albeit cordoned off) heart of churches around the world. Our connection may be limited (and I am arguing that it *is* a limitation) to the livestream edition of those masses in a thousand YouTube channels, but that does not void our connection to the presence of Christ, for the Eucharistic presence is what anchors the presence of the Divine Word in the textures and sinews of creation. All creation, and this must include our digital creations. They make Christ present in the growing queues of the unemployed that we read about in the news on our phone screens, or in the students that we



can only minister to as avatars in video conference calls. The presence of Christ stretches even into the whimsical in the “This is the Lentiest Lent I have ever Lented” memes that cheer the heart, even if momentarily. The abstracting power of internet I mentioned above would still remain, but what that does is stretch the presence of the Body of Christ, not negate it.

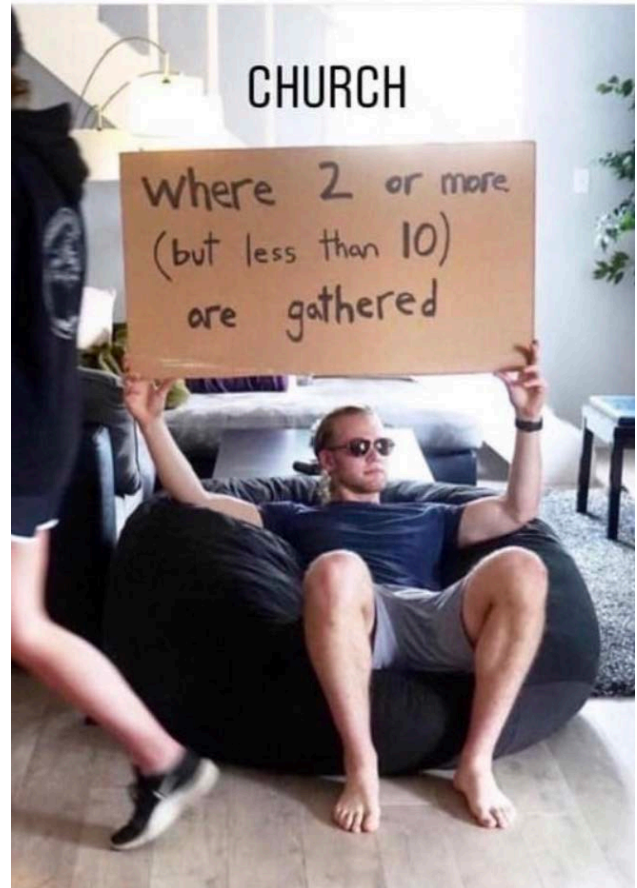
At the same time, as [Timothy of O’Malley](#) (2020) wrote, the Eucharistic Christ unites all things into communion. In the face of our being sequestered from the sacraments as live events, we who have in the past partaken of the Body of Christ should now be turned by the Eucharistic presence into that event that “unite[s] all human beings in a communion of love,” even if we have to do it as avatars. In other words, we are being called to be points of unity that mirror the way the digitized presence of the Eucharistic Christ becomes a point of unity for a million gazes — whether it is through getting extra groceries for the food bank for those who can no longer afford to purchase their own sustenance, setting up digital neighborhoods to open opportunities for fellowship to alert us to any need, or to support local businesses facing difficulty in the face of reduced foot traffic.

To paraphrase a meme, until our churches reopen, the Body of Christ is not disabled but redeployed. Until we meet the Eucharistic Lord face to face, we are reminded in this time of lockdown to be that face moving through the digital byways of our diseased cities.

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**Source**

Malley, T. (2020). The Church's Response Is Saying “No” to Death's Dominion.” *Church Life Journal*. Retrieved from <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/the-churchs-response-is-saying-no-to-deaths-dominion/>.



**Virtual Now, But For How Long?**

Scott Thumma

*After navigating a steep learning curve to become instant virtual churches, for most faith communities except the largest ones, the important question is how many of these new habits are likely to live beyond the coronavirus pandemic.*

**The Past**

In Hartford Institute's 2010 and 2015 Faith Communities Today research of 15,000 faith communities, the majority of congregations, especially the 70% with fewer than 100 worship attendees, are likely facing a steep uphill battle in their efforts to digitally deliver their services in this present crisis. This rapid adaptation has mostly been successful, but it causes me to wonder whether these new habits are likely to live past the pandemic.

It isn't that a majority of these faith communities didn't have the technology at the epidemic's start. Our studies have documented a rise in all forms of tech use from 2010 to 2015 and likely to the present (we are in the midst of the 2020 survey currently). However, our surveys showed that most congregations didn't regularly or robustly use that technology, especially if there were under 100 persons in attendance. We saw evidence of significantly underutilized technology. Relatively few faith communities made meaningful use of the tech they had except for basic tools like email, websites, Wi-Fi in the building, and, to a lesser extent, Facebook and texting. Those congregations who marginally employed their existing technology didn't fare much better on outcomes than those whose communities avoided it altogether. Only those who used these tools "quite a bit" or "a lot" reaped

significant benefits in positive congregational dynamics. For example, not having online giving added no additional income (69% of communities), whereas having any online collection method increased per capita giving by \$114 (18% of churches), but emphasizing electronic giving quite a bit or a lot raised income by \$300 per person. Unfortunately, only 13% of congregations were doing this robust effort pre-COVID-19.

Similar patterns of tech behavior were evident with use of e-newsletters, live streaming, blogs, Twitter, social media except Facebook, and online meeting platforms – 70-80% of congregations were non-users, 10-20% were marginal users, and 5-10% were engaged, active users of the technology.

The reasons for this underuse might offer insights into how long lasting the current virtual surge might be for congregations post epidemic. Generally, most faith communities default to traditional face-to-face approaches, employing practices "the way we have always done it." Religious rituals are embodied, physical, and sensory – breaking bread together, singing together, hugging, kneeling, praying in a line, wearing robes, and smelling the incense. These communal actions shape members' perceptions of what essentially is a gathered religious community. Additionally, over two-thirds of US congregations are small, under 100 attendees, and likely not to have a full-time leader, while larger congregations are more likely to embrace digital ministry efforts and have assigned staff responsible for this effort. Likewise, a significant percentage of congregations, especially smaller ones, are dominated by persons over the age of 65. The older the average age of membership, the less likely they were to be internet or social media users in their everyday lives, our studies found.

### **The Present**

While we presently inhabit a space where traditional embodied approaches to ministry are mostly impossible, or at least socially unacceptable and seriously threaten those members over the age of 65, one has to wonder whether the present virtual practices will last beyond the shelter-in-place orders.

Honestly, as one who for decades has prodded clergy and consulted with congregations to adopt these virtual habits, I've been pleasantly surprised at both the swiftness of the transition to online gatherings and the creativity many clergy and communities have shown in using social media tools to replicate aspects of congregational life. The leadership is using Zoom, Facebook Live, and videos for their sermon and worship presentations while employing email and Facebook posts to disseminate information, offer spiritual support, and build community. Some religious leaders are offering a daily or weekly email or text message with scripture, prayer requests, and words of comfort. I've heard of religious-education teams connecting with their families and children by sending activity packets, children's sermons, and even holding video contests, virtual lock-ins, and Easter egg hunts. Ministry teams are being organized through phone, text, and email to address the significant needs in their congregations and neighborhoods, creating food packets, games, masks, and other supportive measures. The dramatic and rapid shift to a "virtual church" is impressive for an institution that tends to conserve traditional values and also began this pandemic technologically-challenged.

Even in the midst of this mostly successful technological reformation, it is worthwhile to consider the prognosis for permanent change. I would contend that many of these virtual alterations reside on a shaky foundation. In addition to the challenges mentioned above of

size, age, part-time clergy, and an intrinsic penchant for tangible gathered worship, other factors make long-term digital adoption unlikely. First, there is little infrastructure or experience in place to sustain these efforts. Much of the innovation and adaptation in smaller congregations came about through the initiative and ingenuity of a solitary clergyperson making due and learning on the fly. Second, the membership bought into these digital practices out of necessity not due to free choice or intrinsic interest. Acceptance in a crisis is not the same as willing adoption in settled times. Finally, my ad-hoc visits to dozens of online worship performances suggest a stopgap, temporary fix couched in an expressed longing for "normal worship." These experiments have seldom been awe-inspiring or polished worshipful gatherings, so I get this expressed longing for physical hugs and hard pews.

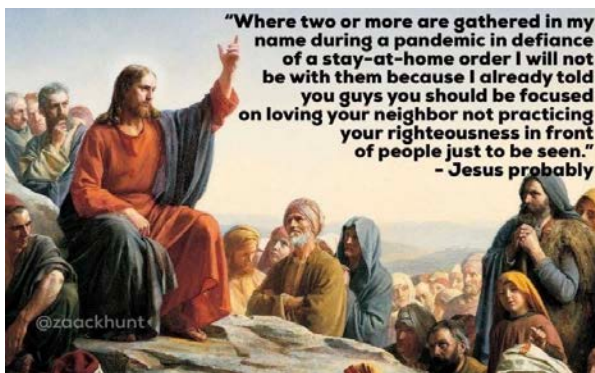
### **The Future**

So the question remains, which of these new digital religious practices and technologies will survive the pandemic? Of all the present adaptations being made in the midst of the crisis, I contend that three practices have a good chance of remaining after religion is no longer sheltered-in-place. Those are online giving, livestreaming, and conferencing platforms for meetings. Online ways of giving will thrive because of the tangible benefit to the budget once members are re-employed. Digital and EBT giving make a significant difference to the bottom line. This will be recognized and appreciated with no additional effort by leadership or members. Likewise, the practice of livestreaming or digitally capturing the sermon will likely outlive the epidemic. We live in an on-demand society and capturing the worship allows it to be freed from its mooring of Sunday, 10 am to noon, in a particular physical structure. The asynchronous benefit to virtual church has already been experienced by

numerous clergy I've heard expressing their surprise at increased viewership. Making the service available on members' timeframes means more of them can "show up" virtually, and it can be captioned for the hearing-impaired. Finally, for a similar reason, virtual-meeting software for committees and gatherings will survive because it allows greater involvement by busy members; easier participation equals increased commitment.

In addition to these three, I truly hope that the virtual religious response to the virus will have a generalized, long-lasting effect on congregations, a mindset change – a greater openness to technological use by Luddites and older members of religious communities. Perhaps this virtual baptism by fire will free them to try out screens in the sanctuary, image magnification of the preacher, digital daily devotionals, e-news announcements, and social media photo sharing. Maybe the epidemic will have a silver lining of bringing religious communities into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century technologically.

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***Reassessing Embodiment and Its Role in Developing Digital Literacies for Ministry***  
Stacy Williams-Duncan and Kyle Matthew Oliver

*Author of a research-based framework of digital literacies for ministry reexamine the framework's structure in light of observations and firsthand leadership experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, arguing that the literacy "presenting authentically and pastorally online" is not the outcome of mastering the other literacies but the motivation to develop them.*

**The Digital Literacies for Ministry Project**

Five years before the novel coronavirus pandemic forced churches to take their worship and many other ministries online, we were applying for the first round of funding for a substantial research project about digital religious engagement and leadership. By 2015, we, and our colleague Lisa Kimball at Virginia Theological Seminary had already been involved in numerous teaching and consulting initiatives aimed at helping faith leaders respond creatively to the sociocultural changes occurring under the impact of new media (Kimball & Oliver, 2013; Fentress-Williams & Williams-Duncan, 2015; Oliver, 2019; Oliver & Kimball, 2019a; Oliver & Kimball, 2019b).

During 2015-16, we interviewed 36 leaders in 13 ministry training organizations and the following summer convened a participatory symposium to refine and extend our preliminary analysis. Our primary research objective was to identify the digital media ministry skills most important for ministers and ministry students. The result was a framework of seven digital literacies for ministry (DLMs, see Table 1) and offered, to our knowledge, the

first empirically-derived ministry competencies emerging from American theological education (Oliver, Kimball, Williams-Duncan, & Blanchard, 2016; Oliver & Williams-Duncan, 2019; Oliver, Williams-Duncan, & Kimball, forthcoming).

Since we identified each literacy via a grounded theory analysis of semi-structured interviews, there was no *a priori* way to order them, much less capture their interrelationships. In our forthcoming foundations paper about this study (Oliver, Williams-Duncan, & Kimball, forthcoming), we grouped them into the four categories also listed in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
**Digital Literacies for Ministry Framework**

Name of literacy (abbreviations boldface)	Definition
<b>Communal Literacies</b>	
<b>Navigating</b> hybrid & digital cultures	the ability to move with confidence through relevant spaces and communities online
<b>Convening</b> hybrid & digital community	the ability to bring together groups online and help them flourish as communities
<b>Dispositional Literacies</b>	
<b>Cultivating a spiritually wise digital habitus (centering)</b>	the ability to apply the insights of spiritual traditions to the daily practice of digitally mediated social participation
<b>Maintaining a posture of experimentation (experimenting)</b>	an orientation for exploring new tools, trying out strategies, tolerating and learning from apparent failures, and innovating in a fast-changing landscape
<b>Constructive Literacies</b>	

**Creating & curating** faith-based media artifacts the ability to find or make and then share appropriate resources to teach faith and prompt reflection

**Connecting media theory to theological reflection (reflecting)** the ability to reflect on new media theory and practice from a theological perspective and on religious belief and practice from a media studies perspective

**Embodied Literacy**

**Presenting** authentically & pastorally online the ability to explore, claim, and “inhabit” appropriate traits of religious leadership

**Digital Literacies Ministries Amid Pandemic**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, our observations as researchers and experiences as congregational leaders have strengthened our confidence in the value of the DLMS. Many religious leaders and the people they serve are progressing rapidly through the development of several of these literacies in the face of tremendous need for connection and continuity.

For example, entire congregations are collaboratively learning to *convene hybrid and digital communities*, socializing with each other in Zoom etiquette and developing or updating online communication covenants and comment-moderation policies. We, and many of the experts we interviewed, have been pressed into emergency service *creating and curating faith-based digital artifacts* by offering impromptu training and crowdsourcing resource collections.

Our understanding of digital literacy follows prominent scholars’ view that these competencies are more about social practice than technical instrumentalism (e.g., Street, 1995; Gee, 2000; Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel,

Clinton, & Robison, 2009). Indeed, our groupings of the literacies in Table 1 underscore their alignment with more traditional understandings of ministry formation. Our hope is that this peculiar moment will help all church leaders better understand this connection. While we never wished to see these devastating circumstances unfold, we are finding they have moved digital ministry conversations usually relegated to elective courses, specialist conferences, and the job descriptions of young associate pastors onto the agendas of bishops, seniors pastors, and even the secular media.

In Figure 1, Episcopal priest Ian Lasch articulates an urgent need to develop new skills — in this case, the literacies we call *creating and curating faith-based media artifacts and maintaining a posture of experimentation*. He articulates emerging priorities in a way that resonated with us as theological educators — not because every religious leader should be an expert video editor, but because digital literacies for ministry are always about being present with our people in the midst of ever-changing ministry circumstances.



**Figure 1:** A priest reports on his pandemic-inspired professional development. Screenshot shared with permission of author.

### Embodiment as Source, Not Result

We originally described the literacy *presenting authentically and pastorally online* as an

embodied literacy that emerged from the skillful integration of the others. As we imagined this relationship, a ministry leader becomes more competent in embodying their leadership role online as they learn to bring their flock together, try new things with them, collect new resources for faithful adaptation, etc. In this way of thinking, it is tempting to view the other literacies as prerequisites.

The responses we've observed during the pandemic have caused us to rethink this aspect of our framing. Amid physical distancing, people who previously would not have even been open to digital ministry have gone online to pragmatically and faithfully meet the spiritual needs of their communities. We have been inspired by those who were honest about their digital skills, willing to experiment and risk "failing" publicly, all while using tools they may not have encountered before.

We realized the leaders that most impressed us demonstrated a high degree of authenticity — to their own values and skills, and to the equipment and other resources available in their community. As Kyle often says in training contexts, they trusted they already had everything they needed to be digital ministers (Oliver, 2016). Instead of understanding embodiment as an *outcome* of the other literacies, the crisis has caused us to view **presenting authentically and pastorally online** as the *motivation* for developing the other literacies.

When there was no other way to be present to their congregations, these leaders entered a strange land and discovered they could still sing the Lord's song (Psalm 137). We believe those who have learned to flourish in digital exile will find their ministries enriched when they return to Jerusalem and continue to practice their new competencies.

### Digital Literacies Ministries After COVID-19

This crisis has reenergized our commitment to DLM research, confirming for us the relevance of several future areas of work we discerned in G a January 2020 strategy session:

- Especially now that many senior pastors have had direct personal experiences of digital ministry, how can we more deeply explore the implications of DLM Jen for religious leadership in a time of accelerating change?
- How can DLM's rich emphasis on spiritually wise habits and critical reflection guide leaders to balance both engagement and critique when considering the moral, spiritual, and communal challenges posed by our digital world? Kim

As ministers and researchers, we hope to look Oli back at the COVID-19 pandemic and see a moment that both expanded and *deepened* the digital ministry conversation.

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**Kyle Oliver** is a media educator specializing in creative meaning making. He manages communications and teaches Christian education at Church Divinity School of the Pacific.

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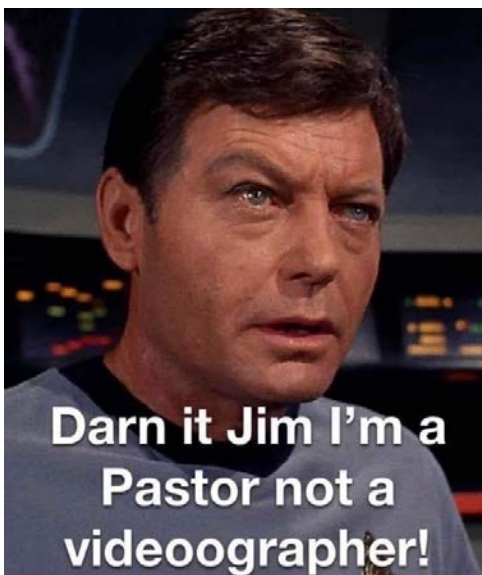
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### ***Is It Real? Mystagogizing the Livestreamed Service***

Daniella Zsupan-Jerom

This essay ponders the reality of worship as a digitally mediated experience and proposes that communities reflect on this intentionally as part of the life of the

In response to the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic, all public gatherings including assemblies of religious practice and worship have ceased, either by order of the government or by the prudent decision of the religious leader. Multitudes of Christian churches, and many more individual persons of faith, have turned anew to social communication in order to broadcast services, devotional practices, prayerful reflections, and encouragement. One significant challenging question arising during this time of transition is to what extent such mediated worship is “real” for those who experience it via broadcast or livestream, especially Eucharistic and sacramental celebrations.

To a certain extent, the answer to this question is defined denominationally, according to the normative sacramental theology of a particular church. Roman Catholics, Orthodox, and some Protestant Christians have a hard line when it comes to broadcasting sacramental events: Participation in the sacraments needs to take place in person, and thus mediating them through broadcast or livestream, while beneficial, does not replace the actual face-to-face event. Other Christian denominations have thought about presence, participation, and online worship in more fluid terms. While these approaches generally pre-exist the current COVID-19 health crisis, the pandemic has brought the question to the table anew. In a



world where Christians can no longer gather face to face, what does it mean to gather online in terms of our worshipful practices of communion?

In essence, the response to this question is simple: Gathering online is unequivocally a blessing. In the fearful context of this global health crisis, many quarantined people are spending their time online, whether checking social media for news, catching up with friends and family, entertainment, shopping, learning a new skill, or troubleshooting. While we watch and wait, we are scrolling, typing, and tapping. By and large, it is social communication that gives us a sense of connection and community, a sense of belonging, a sense of participation and presence these days. For the church to be able to enter into this strange vigil has been eminently appropriate and uplifting. Following a livestreamed service; watching a video message from a religious leader; gathering by means of hashtag, comment feed, or Zoom — these, through the means of technology, say loud and proud that the church is still here, even if the building is closed.

Since the boundaries of social media are porous, these means of gathering online as church have also become uniquely visible and present to those who do not normally practice faith or present in online spaces that are not normally about faith sharing. We are congregating in one very large public gathering space online, and evidence of our practices of faith is theoretically visible to anyone. The closing of church doors has instead opened them up more widely on social media platforms. Livestreaming services and devotions on social media raises very low barriers for people to see what Christians are about, and thus, churches online are not only reaching out to members but are, in fact, offering a public witness. In light of the

Christian imperative to “go and proclaim,” this too is a blessing.

Why then is the “reality” of online worship experiences contested? The motive behind this objection may be a deeper objection to reducing worship experience to an experience of convenience and efficiency. These days, we may discover that sitting with a livestreamed service is in fact good and meaningful. It delivers the essential “content” of worship, the basic “information” that is communicated to us: the readings, the preaching, the prayers, the sights and sounds of preparing the altar and consecrating the Eucharist. We may even sense others present as comments, likes, or hearts float up the screen. We are still fed by this, even when we cannot partake of the bread and wine, Body and Blood. It is efficient: We have prayed, heard the Word, and received an uplifting message. It is convenient, as I am still in my room, in loungewear, sipping on tea, with a toddler running around. There is no risk of infection, but if I am honest, there is also no anxiety to get out of the house on time, no slinking into church late, no embarrassment while corralling a wiggly child. Forced into it as a safer alternative in the time of a health crisis, we discover that online worship also feels more convenient and efficient. There is an elephant in the room, and it is the question that unsettles critics of online worship: Why would we regularly return to face-to-face worship after the pandemic when we can do this online?

Moving forward, it is paramount for churches to reflect on what it means to “do this” vis-à-vis “do this in memory of me.” We have now seen that much of the “content” of worship can be mediated electronically to produce an adequate distance-worship experience. What does this mean for how we understand worship? Is there a purpose to worship and can it be fulfilled online? To what extent can we

measure worship by its adequacy, efficiency, and convenience? Romano Guardini's (1998) classic point about the liturgy being purposeless is relevant here, as he reminds us that worship is for worship's sake and for no other purpose:

When the liturgy is rightly regarded, it cannot be said to have a purpose, because it does not exist for the sake of humanity, but for the sake of God. In the liturgy man is no longer concerned with himself; his gaze is directed towards God. In it man is not so much intended to edify himself as to contemplate God's majesty. The liturgy means that the soul exists in God's presence, originates in Him, lives in a world of divine realities, truths, mysteries and symbols, and really lives its true, characteristic and fruitful life (p. 66).

There is no reference here to "Sunday obligation" or to feeling good about oneself or getting an uplifting message. Worship is simply entering the presence of God and in that also living out most fully who we are. Along these lines, it is worth pondering why this is traditionally done in a face-to-face gathering, rather than alone, and whether being in a face-to-face gathering says something essential about living fully who one is. While responses to the reality of online worship may differentiate along denominational lines, it is across the board worthwhile to reflect on and examine what we understand by worship and how sitting in front of a screen bears impact on that. The challenging part of this question is at its core a catechetical challenge, not a liturgical one. The challenge is to take seriously and respond to the question: Can we do this online? This calls communities of faith to examine and clarify what it is that they are doing when they gather for worship, what is essential about it,

and what can change. It is important therefore to create opportunities for conversation and reflection, a sort of mystagogy around the livestreamed service, and ask ourselves some of these basic questions. Questions like these help to unpack the essential differences between mediated and face-to-face worship and help guide people in the ways they participate in their communities of faith.

By God's grace, when COVID-19 ceases to be a hazard and churches physically re-open, I wager that people will resume gathering face to face, even though we have seen how technology allows us to connect in other ways. Perhaps the online experience of services and devotions can round out rather than replace the traditional ways we gather as church.

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**Source**

Guardini, R. (1998). *The spirit of the liturgy*. New York: Herder & Herder.

