

**THIS IS A LONG POST ABOUT LIVE STREAMING AND CHURCH ONLINE.
THIS IS ABOUT HOW TO MINISTER ONLINE, NOT HOW TO STREAM.**

Preface:

My name is Daniel Herron, I am a junior at Whitworth University in Washington State. I am currently interning with the PC(USA) Office of Public Witness, though in this post I am speaking on my own behalf. For the past nine years, I have led one of the only fully virtual as well as youth-led online churches in the world. My online church is multi-denominational as we serve more than 25,000 young people representing more than 80 countries and every US state. I am also very connected in the church online/online church/virtual church community, as I have spoken at several conferences and attended the annual Church IT Network Conference.

I say all of this because I want to help. I have experience and authority in the area of online ministry. I want this post to share advice, tips, and strategies. I want this to be helpful. I do not want this to be a critique of what anyone is currently doing.

If you have any thoughts or questions or anything else, please feel free to private message me and I would be happy to talk with you.

A Biblical basis:

What I assume most churches are trying to do is either replicate their Sunday service through an online platform (e.g. livestreaming a service on FB Live or posting a pre-recorded video to Youtube), OR coming together to meet as a congregation through an online video-call platform (e.g. church on Zoom). These are both effective ways to have ministry online, my intent in this post is to share with you ways that we as pastors, lay people, and congregants, can do church better online.

The first thing that we can do is change our mindset about church online.

Church online is not a foreign place, nor is it a lesser option. Instead, it is a place where the Holy Spirit resides. Matthew 18:20 reminds us that “anywhere where two or more are gathered, there I will be in their midst.” We are told in Revelation 22:13 that God is the “alpha and omega, the first and the last, the beginning and end.” Our God is too great to be boxed up in our brick and mortar buildings. If our God truly is so great, surely he is present with us online. When we meet together in chat rooms, video calls, and comment sections, there, God is with us.

Engagement and Participation:

Doing ministry online is inherently different than in a physical brick and mortar church. It requires different strategies to engage our congregants, this is the most challenging aspect of live streaming a service or posting a pre-recorded service. Engagement and participation is key. Church is not meant to be a “watched” experience. It should not be a passive form of spiritual entertainment. Engaging with those watching and communicating with them is the best way to keep their attention on the service, instead of the ten thousand other distractions nearby.

How should we do this?

Devote one or two people in your church (maybe an elder or a member of session) to keep a watchful eye in the comments of the live stream or the facebook live comments (call them a chat host or chat moderator). Ask them to reply to church members. When people introduce themselves, have the chat host reply with a welcoming and joyful response. Have them answer questions in the chat, encourage prayer requests and make a list of them. This is not a distraction, in fact this is one of the best ways for congregants to stay focused on the content of the service.

If you are holding church on a Zoom conference call or a different video-call platform such as Google Duo, Blue Jeans, Discord, or Microsoft Teams, intentionally include times that involve participation. Maybe that means having a longer than normal time of prayer concerns, or having a “passing of the peace” in the chat, or maybe its a “share a highlight of your week.” Church Online works best when there is community with one another. Again, church is not supposed to be a passive experience.

Expect to fail and embrace awkwardness:

If you are reading this post, it is more than likely that you new to this whole “church online” thing. Maybe you or your staff struggle with technology. Maybe the stream just blacks out, or the chat breaks. Maybe you are already halfway into the second verse of “All creatures of our God and King” when all of a sudden you realize that no one can hear you. All of these situations are normal. You are not a failure at technology, and you definitely should not just cancel church.

When I first created my virtual church (which is hosted on a video game and everyone has a 3D avatar), I had absolutely no idea what I was doing. I was an eleven-year-old kid trying to pray with my friends online. One of the first times that I held a virtual church service, the virtual place randomly glitched out and sent members of my congregation flying out, halfway into my sermon on forgiveness. It is in moments like these that I believe the Holy Spirit fills in our gaps and mistakes.

Maybe you make a mistake, but if we believe that God is with us when we are gathered online, then church is going to work out. And once the service is over, you learn what you need to fix for next week. Don't be intimidated by other ministries that seem to have it all together. They have had the same problems, the same mistakes, the same issues as you are having. But eventually, maybe even after a few short weeks, it will start to become like a rhythm.

Keep your sermon short:

Let's all say this again for the folks in the back. This point is especially important for church online. When people tune in on a google tab or on their phone from their kitchen table, you are automatically in a competition for their attention. Let's be real, having a sermon that rambles on for twenty minutes is going to get turned off or minimized while they focus on more pertinent issues like the newest Coronavirus memes.

Being short and concise does not necessarily sacrifice quality. Didn't Jesus say something about this in Matthew 6? Don't be like a pharisee. Keep it short. Put emphasis in your words in a way that makes the main takeaways stand out. This can be a challenge, but it is not impossible.

Link people to resources:

This one is important – especially during a pandemic. During your stream or your zoom church, or whatever solution you choose, have your chat hosts link people to resources that are open in the community. Have links for information about the virus, links about the church and online giving, links to suggested worship music, bible plans, or lenten devotionals. Have these prepared ahead of time so that you are ready to assist people when they ask for it.

Walls are destroyed and barriers are broken:

Church online is awesome because it expands your borders. When you live stream your service, you are not only broadcasting to the members of your church (unless you list it as private on youtube or in a closed Facebook group) but you are out there publicly. This is incredible because your church can grow and be blessed in ways that would may have never been imagined. As Christians, the church is a body beyond our local congregations. We are a global family united in Christ.

When you stream to Facebook or Youtube prepare for higher attendance numbers. If you are a local church in Seattle, prepare for viewers from Spokane, Bozeman, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Manila, and London. How people find your stream is a mystery to all of us, but it happens. Soon you have new life and community from all around the globe. Your church makes new friends and new community, in the wake of the fear and pain that Coronavirus has caused. That is our God at work. Expect this to happen.

Closing:

I hope that you will be blessed by doing church online. I hope that it works and that it is fruitful for you. However, it is not for everyone and every situation. If you give it a few weeks and it isn't working for your congregation, it is okay to give up. As long as we remember that God is in control. That God is still on the throne, even when Coronavirus causes us fear. I hope that it is not too cliché to quote Jeremiah 29, "God has a plan for us, a plan to prosper us and not to harm us."

I have had the great honor these past two months to intern at the PC(USA) Office of Public Witness. In the work of that office, I have seen firsthand that our denomination is alive and prospering. That our church is filled with the Holy Spirit and good work is being done. If doing church online does not work out for you, it is okay, because our God is still holding us in his hands. Do not be afraid.

TECHNICAL:

I know that this post did not mention much about the technical aspects of getting online or starting to live stream, etc. If you want a good guide to that, either send me a message or check out the resources at: <https://thechurch.digital/start>