

**What’s an Online Campus, and Should Our Church Have One?**

Before COVID-19 it may have been hard for many churches to imagine a need for a dedicated online church campus. When Alice Drive Baptist launched its campus in February 2020 it had no way of knowing how instrumental this type of virtual presence would soon be. Online Campus Minister Corey Gant says the ministry is evolving but already showing great value.

“Our mission is to help as many people as possible to take their next step toward Jesus. We are learning that online worship is extending your front doors for someone to peek inside your church before they step foot in the doors. Offering online groups shows what your church values in terms of community, and if someone plugs in this way before they participate in live worship that’s a first step,” Corey says.

Alice Drive’s immediate community includes Shaw Air Force Base, so individuals and families are constantly moving in or out of the area or experiencing deployment. An online campus is a great way to continue engaging these members and visitors regardless of their physical location. Yes, it may give casual attenders a way to stay marginally connected, but Senior Pastor Clay Smith says it also gives folks with negative previous church experiences the chance to heal and return through a safe space.

“Online services expand your outer circle. It can give fringe people their best opportunity to continue to hear from God. Most of your core and committed people will not be impacted by an online worship service,” Clay says.

“Expanding your outer circle” is a concept many churches can relate to. Having online-only worship has shown the exponential opportunities churches have right now to engage a lost world in new ways. To be clear – livestreaming a worship service is not the same thing as having an online church campus. But physical and online church campuses do have the same components of outreach and evangelism, fellowship, discipleship, serving and worship.

Steve Perky, a ministry applied technology strategist and consultant and staff member of a Virginia mega church, recently introduced CMBA pastors to the concept of an online campus within a church’s ministry model and next steps for launching. He points to changing aspects of our culture, even before COVID-19, that are redefining how, where, when and with whom the Church is doing things. These aspects include our time, relationships, place (where your connectivity is) and presence (in person or virtually).

“This is a vital time in church history as a whole. Churches are doing ministry off the map right now. There is a technology-enhanced presence where you can be mentally present somewhere and physically absent from one another, but real community, interaction and even decisions can be made in this state. An online campus focuses on engagement whether you’re physically together or not,” Steve explains.

In his [presentation](https://www.columbiametro.org/one-priority-briefing-live-05-12-20/) Steve linked the evolution of technology with the Church’s response to the world in this time of crisis because “now we can relate to areas where there hasn’t been a presence of the gospel.” Think of an online church campus as its own location with different gatherings of people. Steve suggests it could be for individuals, university students, couples of all ages, people who can’t attend traditional worship because of their work schedules or virtual small groups logging in at the same time. An online campus provides the functions of a physical campus such as being recognized by senior leadership as a viable ministry of the congregation, having a campus pastor and being resourced and integrated into all aspects of the church including voting, communion and physical baptisms.

Corey says Alice Drive began discussing details of their new campus in December, then started small with volunteers interacting with livestream participants as they launched. He has added live videos before worship and relevant announcements, hosts Facebook Watch Parties and says the ministry plans to expand to host sermon discussions and interactive online life groups. One Sunday morning Corey chatted live with a deployed church member and told him how the man’s wife and son were serving at church that same day.

“It was very special to tell the mom and son that I’d talked to him and also to share with the dad that I’d just seen his son serving. This is a great expression of what the Church looks like today. And that was an encouraging moment for me, to see that the direction we’re going in with this ministry is a good one,” he shares.

When a church births an online campus, Steve identifies three phases that happen before the launch. The first is to broadcast a livestream worship service with no two-way engagement involved. Next, worship hosts are added to interact with those virtually attending the service. The third phase is labeled “pivot” for the turn a church takes to seriously invest in the process by identifying the vision, people (video/audio team, social media ambassadors, online small group leaders and course creators, to name a few), the how-to processes and technology required.

The next phase is a formal launch of the online campus and team commissioning, just as a congregation might do when planting a new church. According to Steve, when the launch is done in a healthy way and with a strong vision people will continue to attend where they feel connected. In other words, “don’t be afraid that folks will stop attending live church.” A successful online campus becomes “converged” when online and offline processes and communications solidify.

Steve says the next phase for a healthy online campus is replication. The church should use analytics to “identify clusters of people to get them together physically or virtually. The goal is to create microsite opportunities to engage where these groups are such as at universities, in neighborhoods or prisons, with expats or the military or through lunch & learns at work.”

Alice Drive is looking ahead for ways it can reach unchurched people through the online campus after live worship services eventually resume.

“Our online campus is more than just a Sunday ministry. There could be any number of reasons people want to be connected to church but are unable to – like when a surprise global pandemic comes around – but we can still reach out and pastor our people this way. When an entire campus of your ministry is dedicated to connecting with people online it exposes needs, brings awareness and provides another avenue of helping the gospel go out,” Corey says.

Resources are available to churches for each step in the process of creating, launching, growing and duplicating an online campus. Steve created a page on his website for CMBA churches that lists suggested resources for online leader training and discipleship materials and links to successful online church campuses, located at [www.steveperky.com/CMBA](http://www.steveperky.com/CMBA). Steve’s original video conference [presentation](https://www.columbiametro.org/one-priority-briefing-live-05-12-20/) may be accessed on the CMBA’s [website](https://www.columbiametro.org/).