

Because Online Worship is a New Normal . . .

By

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. . . it is time to do a serious evaluation of our use of it.

Who thought in the middle of March 2020 that online streaming of live or recorded worship services would become a new normal in worship? Leading edge church innovators felt it was overdue. Early adopters had started doing it. They created online campuses before the pandemic.

More people decided by Easter 2020 it was a trend and not a fad. Others hoped it was a fad and the return to live worship only would happen by summer.

Now it is time to accept it is a new normal.

Recently, I spent a Sunday looking at the online presence of churches in our area. I checked in with 44 churches online. The quality differences are clear. Here are some of my observations. Some are intentionally funny. Some are piercing, as we take a frank poke at ourselves. None are meant to be critical, but only to take an honest look.

First, some churches do it very well and others do it very badly. OK, I did not have to look at any church's online presence to come up with that observation. It fits the "no-brainer" category.

Second, some churches spent a lot of money on livestreaming equipment, and some are still using someone's smartphone to livestream.

Third, few pastors are going to make it as televangelists. They better hope everyone comes back to live worship.

Fourth, seldom are all the microphones on and the volume appropriately adjusted. Bad microphones? Too many undertrained and inexperienced people in the sound booth? One pastor pleaded live for someone to volunteer to handle the technology for the worship services. He checks it every week and admits he does not know what he is doing.

Fifth, look at the camera. Many worship leaders act like online people are lurkers to ignore and not worshipers to acknowledge with a greeting, a look, or a hand wave. When this is the case, do not be surprised to discover people online were not really paying attention.

Sixth, guess what? People online are less likely to close their eyes during prayers. Or to shut their eyes quickly enough if you do not say you are getting ready to pray. When people move to get in place for whatever is next, that is what they focus on. They do not pray.

Seven, I have checked in with some of these churches before. I see there are now many fewer people watching online than previously. According to Facebook, I was the only person watching one particular service during that time.

Eight, many churches are on Facebook only or on Facebook and something like YouTube or Vimeo. Those not on Facebook do not always tell you where you can find their live service. It is necessary to go to their website to find out.

I also experienced some helpful ways to do live online worship.

First, some churches are using an app on the You Version Bible to share the sermon scripture and an outline to take notes. Great idea. Look into it. It would be a common thing live worshipers and online worshipers could use.

Second, a few churches are rebroadcasting their worship once or twice during the week. They promote this on social media or their website. Any church can post their worship service recording to their website and social media. They can send out a link to the worship recording with any electronic communication with their mailing list during the week.

Third, a few churches also do a really great job with their video announcements. For many it is simply a “talking-head.” One idea is to do recorded announcements only for the online worshipers that speak directly to them. The live worship can have live announcements.

Fourth, some churches have a person watching for online comments during worship. They respond and welcome people, affirm their comments about worship, and answer questions they pose. This interaction helps online people feel more connected with what is happening in a way less easily done when attending live worship. For churches with online campus pastors, it is this campus pastor responding.

Fifth, asking people to register their presence online is a good thing – especially for first-time guests. Supplying a clear, easy way to do this is the challenge. Some churches do this. When people register online, be sure there is a personal follow-up with them within 24 hours.

Sixth, a small number of churches do their online worship with exceptional excellence. I almost went “wow” in seeing the difference in quality when there was obvious excellence. If online worship is the place an increasing number of people first connect with a church, then these churches will do well in reaching new people. Those with lower quality will primarily rally faithful members and not connect with many new people.

Ultimately having clear, reliable online worship that works right every week is a challenge for smaller membership congregations. That means for the majority of churches, the online streamline of live and recorded worship may be a new normal in terms of expectations of some worshipers, but not a standard they will be able to achieve with consistency. Long-term, some smaller membership churches will need to reconsider continuing the practice of streaming live or posting recorded worship services.

It also suggests another ministry and training opportunity for denominations. If you are a smaller membership church struggling with this new normal, would you want for your denomination to supply training, on-site consultation, and perhaps grants to upgrade your equipment?