

THIS IS A VERY GOOD ARTICLE! – PLEASE READ!

Are you ready for hybrid online/in-person worship? A Presbyterian pastor suggests ‘the truly fresh start you need’

by the Rev. Richard Hong Jim Gear, edit



ENGLEWOOD, New Jersey - Sunday morning has become a stressful time for so many pastors who never imagined that their job would involve being an AV tech. **“Hallelujah!” is the cry when the internet connection stays up and Zoom properly connects to Facebook Live.** After seven plus weeks of working on this, many churches are finally thinking, “We’ve got this down.” And now that it’s working, it’s time to go the next step. Here’s what you need to consider.

Virtual worship is still a necessity --- You may be reading about churches planning to reopen and doing so in phases. Among the discussions of reopening is how to worship while maintaining “social distancing.” But have you considered what six feet of distance looks like? Six feet is further than you may think - and as churches, we should err on the side of caution. The standard distance between rows/pews is 36 inches. So, sitting in every other row is right at the limit. Laterally, a seat is typically 18-22 inches wide. So, you really need four empty seats between unrelated people (let’s presume family members would sit together because they live together). So, your seating capacity will be extremely reduced if you want to strictly adhere to distancing guidelines. Then it will also be recommended that persons in high-risk groups - the elderly, the immuno-compromised, etc. - continue to abstain from attending larger gatherings. Therefore, when we are “allowed” to resume in-person worship, it seems clear that a lot of people may continue to watch from home. These include:

- People who would exceed the reduced capacity limits.
- People in high-risk groups.
- People who’ve simply decided they prefer online worship.
- People who are anxious about going out.

Altogether, that’s potentially a lot of your congregation. And if you aren’t ready to continue to serve them online, you could lose them.

Serving both online and in-person --- Congregations that had not been livestreaming, or those for whom livestreaming was not a focus of their ministry, often completely reworked what they were doing in order to adapt to the online-only environment. The symmetry was that in each case, whether before or after the crisis, the worship experience had been designed with a single focus. The focus that used to be on the in-house congregation became a focus on the at-home congregation. When reopening happens, you will now have a different challenge: Creating a worship experience that is appealing to both the in-church and at-home congregants. My congregation at First Presbyterian Church of Englewood, New Jersey, has been livestreaming since 2017, and that caused us to have already addressed some of the problems mentioned below:

Camera positions - Is your camera(s) in a place now where it cannot be when in-person worship resumes? If you’re recording with a camera directly in front of the pulpit, that’s not sustainable. You may need new cameras that shoot well from afar. Hint: Keep them at ground level. Don’t put them in the balcony. But the ideal height is about seven feet. You want a very slight down-angle toward the people. Think of people who take selfies. They always hold the camera above the head, not below. It looks better.

Sound - If you’re using the native microphone in a smartphone, that isn’t sustainable. You need to run audio from your sound system into the livestream. You may need additional microphones to pick up ambient sound, or sound from instruments such as organs that don’t normally feed through your sound system.

Interaction - Are you doing worship over Zoom, where congregants have a way to interact by doing things such as submitting a prayer request? How will you continue that? We always permitted people to text their prayer requests to a special text message service, though you could just buy an inexpensive smartphone for that purpose. (You probably don’t want everyone texting the pastor.)

Giving - Most of you already had or instituted online giving during the crisis. People won’t want to have an offering plate touch 50 hands. How will you receive “contactless offerings?”

Starting fresh, not starting over --- If this sounds like starting over, you’re not. You’re starting fresh - this time with a knowledge base that you didn’t have before and congregants who know how to access your services online. You have a head start that you didn’t have before. Use this time now to reconfigure your worship. Shipping disruptions mean that equipment you used to be able to get in two days may now take up to three weeks to arrive, so order everything you need now. Your worship space is empty; it’s a great time to install new equipment. If you don’t start reconfiguring before your people return, you may only be able to meet the needs of your in-person congregation at a time when not every parishioner is able or willing to return. But if you shift to building a service that is appealing to both people who are in your sanctuary and those who are at home, you will be laying the foundation for a level of connection you could never achieve before. **And that could be the truly fresh start you need.**