

Online Worship Services

An Overview

The significant difference between a traditional Sunday at Church and today's online-at-home experience is the absence of a physical congregation or community. We've been a "join us at our church building" type of community, and now we have been forced online. Church is no longer "at church"!

It is easy to see that we face a long term future of "some always at home, some always at church, many in the middle doing both at different times." This isn't a new thing, either. We've always had shut-ins, hospitalized, travelers and newcomers, but we've never institutionalized a way to regularly reach out to them.

Now we are doing just that! We've successfully deployed tactical responses (live Facebook streaming, Zoom conference calls, and worship videos on the web) that bring together parishioners and the clergy!

But.

A byproduct of our quick shift to *online* is that we've moved away from an active community brimming with participants (ushers, lectors, choir, coffee hour hosts, altar guild and acolytes, peace-passers and greeters) towards a very passive "watch the clergy video online" one, with little to actively engage and nurture our sense of belonging.

Saint Andrew's "in person" community on a random weekend was 200 to 300, and our now online services are "viewed" by 150 to 200, with 50 or so that Zoom in for coffee hour and a prayer circle - which sounds good until you realize that we are "missing" about a hundred people every week. They just anonymously and quietly disappeared....

To counter this trend, we must proactively involve more - and different - people in our online services every week. At every opportunity, we need to actively nurture and grow our community's sense of active belonging, of being in communion with each other.

This guide focuses on the technological side of how we've created a new, socially distanced online kind of together that supports our creative and spiritual selves, but technology by itself it is insufficient to address the need - the parish vestry and church leadership need to integrate this "newness of life" into its ongoing programs, planning and preaching.

Let the spirit of innovation, experimentation and an absolute trust in the Holy Spirit shine through us all as we preach, pray and sing (& geek out) online - all for the glory of God. Soli Deo gloria!

Audience

I set out to write a “how to” process guide aimed at those within the Saint Andrew's community who would be doing the work of creating and publishing online content, and quickly realized that the “rest of us”, within our parish, out there in our diocese and in communities around the world also needed to understand what was being done, so all of us could integrate this new way of interacting into our existing organizational and ministerial structures.

The end result, I hope, will be of interest to anyone setting up or working with online ministry, though the specifics and details presume a reasonable level of liturgical, musical and technological comfort and experience.

Our clergy must become very comfortable using computers, smartphones, social media and videos as communication tools, but should also seek out helpers to pick up the technical and routine details of bringing their ministry online.

The church's organizational leaders may need to rethink budgets, staffing and program focus. A whole new outreach ministry may need to be created and launched in addition to all the existing physical in-person focused ministries, and some of what we are starting now during the pandemic will need to continue after we reopen and start getting back to normal.

Parish staff and program volunteers will need to become proficient in using and managing social media accounts, cloud storage, email and websites - the whole point of this guide is to get the church online! Someone will need to learn more about streaming, online copyright licenses, monetization, uploads and a plethora of other “stuff.”

For things musical, the Director and Performers need to be comfortable with the technical world of microphones, cameras and recording software, and have reliable internet access.

The technical Producers need to be comfortable fluent with computers and software, have access to “good/fast/new” computers, and have the curiosity and drive to learn how to use video editing tools such as Non Linear Editors (aka NLEs). They will need access to a fast Internet connection - video files start at a couple of hundred MB and can grow to several GB, depending on resolution and length.

It is very important to note that, while one motivated person can start a congregation's growth into an online community, it will take a team of volunteers to successfully produce a stream of high quality videos week after week, month after month. Start recruiting that team now, so everyone can learn the ropes together!

Lastly, the congregation members themselves will need help getting online and taking advantage of these new worship activities. They will have a mix of old and new expectations after the quarantine starts to lift. One on one mentoring and training is important - we can not simply assume that everyone can or will figure out how to use Zoom or find website links to the service videos.

How We Got Here

St. Andrew's began recording weekly services in our sanctuary in 2010, and evolved from a single fixed camera aimed at the pulpit to several remotely controlled PTZ cameras that can capture the entire service. Our Youth Group records, lightly edits and uploads these weekly videos to Vimeo for latter viewing. Last year we even started live streaming the service and seeding clergy and vestry conversations about outreach, pastoral care and the desired relationship between our existing local and new remote communities.

Then the pandemic hit, and we no longer had the luxury of pondering and moving slowly. Our live stream became the main worship access for members who were self quarantining, and then even that luxury was taken away as we all sheltered in place.

Our first services during quarantine were recorded on Zoom with a small group of clergy, lay readers and musicians, and then edited along with images of the bulletin and some self-recorded solos into a video that was live streamed Sunday Morning at 10am. This continued for several weeks while we learned from our failures. Neither the Internet nor our community were up to the task. Every church in the country was doing live services online at the same time, and nobody was comfortable with the technology; the viewing experience was poor, with streams not starting, performance lags, drop outs and freezes making services unwatchable.

In spite of this, our online ministry exploded in many directions, with a short Zoom-based Morning Prayer every weekday, a weekly evening Zoom-based Bible study, online EfM classes, a Sunday morning Zoom Stepping Stones Worship service for our jail and prison re-entry community followed by a Zoom parish coffee hour and a facebook group. The Sunday Service Video is now uploaded on Saturdays and publicized via links on the church website, making it possible to watch the service at any time.

In parallel with this expanding ministry, the composition of our service video evolved. We started with musicians on Zoom (Solos work well, Solos with background music, not so much, and multiple voices and instruments, not at all) . We now regularly combine segments from a Zoom "staged service", segments recorded in the sanctuary, virtual choirs and virtual hymns created from the independent performances of a half dozen or more individuals, slideshows and announcements into one coordinated and smooth flowing online viewable worship service. With outtakes and humorous clips at the end - God did create us with a sense of joy, after all.