

Virtual Worship is Widening the Doors of the Church

In the News

"As this pandemic transforms faith communities, the national conversation among leaders has been too timid and tactical," said Baptist pastor Joseph Warren Walker to *Religion News Service* last week. He lamented that conversation has been mostly focused on questions related to in-person worship, such as, "How soon can we get bodies back into the pews? How many in the sanctuary at one time? How far apart should worshipers sit? And should we require masks?"

Walker believes that these are the wrong questions. Instead, he urged church leaders and members to wrestle with issues such as, "How do we transition fully and faithfully to virtual worship? How do we reintroduce in-person worship as part of a rich virtual experience once the pandemic is over? Most importantly, what can Covid-19 teach us about bringing people to God no matter where they are or where we are?" He is convinced that physical and virtual worship must coexist in churches that are faithful and relevant, both today and tomorrow.

Prior to the pandemic, services in some churches were already shifting from church buildings to virtual options such as streamed services and podcasts. According to Barna Group research, this "worship shifting" was being done by 22 percent of all practicing Christians and 52 percent of practicing Christian millennials, at least half the time.

Then, when the coronavirus arrived, most churches quickly shut down their in-person worship services and moved entirely to the online space. Pew Research reports that 82 percent of U.S. adults say that their place of worship is streaming or recording its services so that people can watch them online or on TV. Only 12 percent say their place of worship has not done this, while 5 percent say they don't know. The churchgoing Christians who say their church offers streaming or recorded services online or on TV includes evangelicals (92 percent) and mainline Protestants (86 percent). Most Catholics (79 percent) and Protestants in the African-American tradition (73 percent) say their churches are making services available remotely.

As of April 30, 2020, only 3 percent of all U.S. adults were gathering in person for religious services. Some churches began to reopen in May and June, but then new outbreaks of the coronavirus began to surge. According to *The New York Times*, more than 650 coronavirus cases have been linked to nearly 40 churches and religious events across the United States since the beginning of the pandemic, with many outbreaks occurring as Americans resumed their pre-pandemic activities. Many churches that were anxious to reopen their buildings are now being forced to close their facilities again.

Despite the shutdown of church buildings, 24 percent of U.S. adults say their faith has become stronger because of the coronavirus pandemic. Many say their faith hasn't changed much (47 percent), others say the question is not applicable because they were not religious to begin with (26 percent), and a few say their faith has become weaker (2 percent). Christians in African-American Protestant churches and those who describe themselves as "very religious" are particularly likely to say that their faith has become stronger.

Walker said, "The good news is that Covid-19, for all its trials, not only forces us to reimagine the way we will address the worship preferences of our congregations going forward but gives us room to transform our ideas into action." Although he says that he will not bring people back into church buildings until there is a vaccine for Covid-19, he will continue to offer robust ministry through digital platforms. The key to success, he believes, "is to accept that this transformation will be permanent and make the most of it."

For the past ten years, Walker's church has offered online ministry and the strategy has worked well. "Our congregation has grown into the tens of thousands," he reports, "not only inside our buildings but outside -- and, in the latter case, significantly on college and university campuses. Our youth-focused ministries, many of them online, are among our strongest and most popular."

Fast Company reports that some faith communities have found that moving online has helped them to attract new visitors or win back lapsed members. They are now reaching people who couldn't get to houses of worship because of distance,

schedule conflicts or disability. While online worship is a challenge for some communities of faith, others report that it is making religion more accessible than ever.

Walker believes that "Covid-19 has merely hastened the arrival of a new world of worship that has been coming our way for decades." In his view, virtual worship is not a sign that the doors of the church will be closed forever. Rather, "it can open them wider."

Applying the News Story

As you and your church community make plans for returning to in-person worship, think about whether you will continue your online services. Discuss the value and potential of virtual ministry, as well as its challenges and deficits, as you look toward the future.

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Exodus 4:2

The LORD said to [Moses], "What is that in your hand?" He said, "A staff." (For context, read 4:1-6.)

After God revealed his divine name, Moses became anxious about how the people would respond to him. He said, "But suppose they do not believe me" (v. 1), and then God asked him to throw his staff on the ground. When the staff hit the ground, it became a snake. Then God told him to grab the snake by the tail, and when Moses did this it turned back into a staff. This miracle occurred so that the people would believe that God had appeared to Moses.

Questions: *TWW* team member Liz Antonson says that the 2020 answer to God's question is not "a staff" but "a tablet, a smartphone, a laptop, a TV." What is in your hand, and what can God do with it? How can God use the tools we have to show that God is working through us, as God worked through Moses?

Habakkuk 2:2

Then the LORD answered [Habakkuk] and said: Write down the vision; Make it plain upon tablets, so that the one who reads it may run. (For context, read 2:1-5.)

Most scholars place the book of Habakkuk near the time of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. The second chapter begins with Habakkuk complaining about the amount of time he has to wait in order to receive justice from God. He says, "I will keep watch to see what [God] will say to me, and what he will answer concerning my complaint" (v. 1). He raises the question of theodicy (from the Greek words for "god" and "justice"), which asks why wicked people prosper at the expense of the righteous.

Some might find it odd that the book is called the "oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw" (1:1), since English speakers tend to think that oracles are heard instead of seen. But the Hebrew word *hazah*, "saw," means "to have a vision" in the prophetic sense. This visual language continues when God responds to Habakkuk, "rite the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it." In the 21st century, this vision could be a video on an electronic tablet.

Questions: How can churches use modern technologies to share a new vision today? What is particularly effective about visions that are seen instead of heard? Why do we need to share messages in ways that runners can read them?

Matthew 13:34-35

Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet: "I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world." (No context needed.)

One fresh approach that Jesus took with his teaching was the telling of parables. These short, pithy stories contained insights about God and the kingdom of heaven, and they were usually based in the everyday life of the people. These parables sometimes proclaimed "what has been hidden from the foundation of the world," and sometimes they had the effect of revealing the kingdom to Jesus' disciples while hiding the kingdom from others (vv. 10-13). To get a deeper understanding of the parables, consider reading the 2014 book *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*, by Amy-Jill Levine.

Questions: What sorts of parables can be presented effectively through online worship? How can audio and video be used in creative ways to take the message of Jesus beyond the walls of the church? What are the advantages and disadvantages of such communication?

Acts 11:26

... So it was that for an entire year they met with the church and taught a great many people, and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called "Christians." (For context, read 11:19-26.)

The first followers of Jesus were scattered because of persecution, and the leaders of the church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to Antioch to support the believers in that place. Barnabas asked Saul (the apostle Paul) to help him, and for a year they met with the church in Antioch. The Greek word for church is *ekklesia*, which means "assembly." Barnabas and Paul taught many people and met with the church in Antioch, the place in which the word "Christian" was first used. Some scholars think "Christian" was first used as a pejorative about followers of Jesus, one which was later adopted by the church as a useful term.

Questions: In what ways do you believe that people need to assemble to be the church? Teaching can certainly be done virtually, but it is harder to meet as the church in the online space. How can assembling be done virtually, if at all? How can streaming services and other technologies be turned, like the term "Christian," into something that is useful for the church?