

Virtual Now, But for How Long? Scott Thumma

The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online

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After navigating a steep learning curve to become instant virtual churches, for most faith communities except the largest ones, the important question is how many of these new habits are likely to live beyond the coronavirus pandemic.

The Past

In Hartford Institute's 2010 and 2015 Faith Communities Today research of 15,000 faith communities, the majority of congregations, especially the 70% with fewer than 100 worship attendees, are likely facing a steep uphill battle in their efforts to digitally deliver their services in this present crisis. This rapid adaptation has mostly been successful, but it causes me to wonder whether these new habits are likely to live past the pandemic. It isn't that a majority of these faith communities didn't have the technology at the epidemic's start. Our studies have documented a rise in all forms of tech use from 2010 to 2015 and likely to the present (we are in the midst of the 2020 survey currently). However, our surveys showed that most congregations didn't regularly or robustly use that technology, especially if there were under 100 persons in attendance. We saw evidence of significantly underutilized technology. Relatively few faith communities made meaningful use of the tech they had except for basic tools like email, websites, Wi-Fi in the building, and, to a lesser extent, Facebook and texting. Those congregations who marginally employed their existing technology didn't fare much better on outcomes than those whose communities avoided it altogether. Only those who used these tools "quite a bit" or "a lot" reaped significant benefits in positive congregational dynamics. For example, not having online giving added no additional income (69% of communities), whereas having any online collection method increased per capita giving by \$114 (18% of churches), but emphasizing electronic giving quite a bit or a lot raised income by \$300 per person. Unfortunately, only 13% of congregations were doing this robust effort pre-COVID-19. Similar patterns of tech behavior were evident with use of e-newsletters, live streaming, blogs, Twitter, social media except Facebook, and online meeting platforms – 70-80% of congregations were non-users, 10-20% were marginal users, and 5-10% were engaged, active users of the technology. The reasons for this underuse might offer insights into how long lasting the current virtual surge might be for congregations post epidemic. Generally, most faith communities default to traditional face-to-face approaches, employing practices "the way we have always done it." Religious rituals are embodied, physical, and sensory – breaking bread together, singing together, hugging, kneeling, praying in a line, wearing robes, and smelling the incense. These communal actions shape members' perceptions of what essentially is a gathered religious community. Additionally, over two-thirds of US congregations are small, under 100 attendees, and likely not to have a full-time leader, while larger congregations are more likely to embrace digital ministry efforts and have assigned staff responsible for this effort. Likewise, a significant percentage of congregations, especially smaller ones, are dominated by persons over the age of 65. The older the average age of membership, the less likely they were to be internet or social media users in their everyday lives, our studies found. After navigating a steep learning curve to become instant virtual churches, for most faith communities except the largest ones, the

important question is how many of these new habits are likely to live beyond the coronavirus pandemic.

The Present

While we presently inhabit a space where traditional embodied approaches to ministry are mostly impossible, or at least socially unacceptable and seriously threaten those members over the age of 65, one has to wonder whether the present virtual practices will last beyond the shelter-in-place orders. Honestly, as one who for decades has prodded clergy and consulted with congregations to adopt these virtual habits, I've been pleasantly surprised at both the swiftness of the transition to online gatherings and the creativity many clergy and communities have shown in using social media tools to replicate aspects of congregational life. The leadership is using Zoom, Facebook Live, and videos for their sermon and worship presentations while employing email and Facebook posts to disseminate information, offer spiritual support, and build community. Some religious leaders are offering a daily or weekly email or text message with scripture, prayer requests, and words of comfort. I've heard of religious education teams connecting with their families and children by sending activity packets, children's sermons, and even holding video contests, virtual lock-ins, and Easter egg hunts. Ministry teams are being organized through phone, text, and email to address the significant needs in their congregations and neighborhoods, creating food packets, games, masks, and other supportive measures. The dramatic and rapid shift to a "virtual church" is impressive for an institution that tends to conserve traditional values and also began this pandemic technologically-challenged. Even in the midst of this mostly successful technological reformation, it is worthwhile to consider the prognosis for permanent change. I would contend that many of these virtual alterations reside on a shaky foundation. In addition to the challenges mentioned above of size, age, part-time clergy, and an intrinsic penchant for tangible gathered worship, other factors make long-term digital adoption unlikely. First, there is little infrastructure or experience in place to sustain these efforts. Much of the innovation and adaptation in smaller congregations came about through the initiative and ingenuity of a solitary clergy person making due and learning on the fly. Second, the membership bought into these digital practices out of necessity not due to free choice or intrinsic interest. Acceptance in a crisis is not the same as willing adoption in settled times. Finally, my ad-hoc visits to dozens of online worship performances suggest a stopgap, temporary fix couched in an expressed longing for "normal worship." These experiments have seldom been awe-inspiring or polished worshipful gatherings, so I get this expressed longing for physical hugs and hard pews.

The Future

So the question remains, which of these new digital religious practices and technologies will survive the pandemic? Of all the present adaptations being made in the midst of the crisis, I contend that three practices have a good chance of remaining after religion is no longer sheltered-in-place. Those are online giving, livestreaming, and conferencing platforms for meetings. Online ways of giving will thrive because of the tangible benefit to the budget once members are re-employed. Digital and EBT giving make a significant difference to the bottom line. This will be recognized and appreciated with no additional effort by leadership or members. Likewise, the practice of livestreaming or digitally capturing the sermon will likely outlive the epidemic. We live in an on-demand society and capturing the worship allows it to be freed from its mooring of Sunday,

10 am to noon, in a particular physical structure. The asynchronous benefit to virtual church has already been experienced by numerous clergy I've heard expressing their surprise at increased viewership. Making the service available on members' timeframes means more of them can "show up" virtually, and it can be captioned for the hearing impaired. Finally, for a similar reason, virtual meeting software for committees and gatherings will survive because it allows greater involvement by busy members; easier participation equals increased commitment. In addition to these three, I truly hope that the virtual religious response to the virus will have a generalized, long-lasting effect on congregations, a mindset change – a greater openness to technological use by Luddites and older members of religious communities. Perhaps this virtual baptism by fire will free them to try out screens in the sanctuary, image magnification of the preacher, digital daily devotionals, e-news announcements, and social media photo sharing. Maybe the epidemic will have a silver lining of bringing religious communities into the 21st Century technologically.