

Church Life

Coronavirus

Worship

Online Worship Suddenly Became the Norm. Here's How Churches Are Adapting.

By Eliza Cortés Bast

For many pastors around the world, the past few weeks presented a new experience—hosting an online worship service. For some, it was an exciting opportunity to try things for the first time. For others, it was a time of frustration (“The server crashed five minutes in! Where do I look when I’m talking?”). For most, it was a mixture of both. If you’re a pastor or church leader struggling to figure out how to do church virtually, you are not alone!

As our communities prepare for longer timelines for sheltering in place, many churches who initially hesitated to try online worship may be preparing to gather virtually. Here are some encouraging notes from pastors and leaders who have been navigating this new normal for a few weeks now.

Was this your first time doing online worship?

Pastors Anna and Ron Radcliffe of City Chapel in Grand Rapids, Michigan, held worship via Zoom for the first time a few weeks ago. “It was beautiful,” Anna says. “We invited people to use the chat function to let us know they were there, to hear how they were feeling. It was amazing.”

Tim TenClay, pastor of Community Reformed Church in Manhasset, New York, also moved worship online for the first time a few weeks ago.

As the situation became more dire here in New York City, we made the decision to go online,” TenClay says. “I made a short ‘At Home’ liturgy where people and families could follow along and sent out the link to the congregation. It wasn’t about providing an online service so much, but providing people with something that felt comforting and familiar.”

Grove Reformed Church in New Jersey has been regularly streaming services to YouTube Live for five years now, but Rev. Steven Germoso switched to Facebook Live in this season, “because that is where people are.”

What was challenging to figure out about online worship?

This was our first time not taping from our church location,” says Cedric Nelms of Chosen Generation Church in Long Beach, California. “It was stressful figuring out how and where to set up and record.”

I had to decide what my ‘standards’ were going to be,” says TenClay. Some pastors

have chosen more of a living room setting, giving homilies from a couch or kitchen table, while some have opted to tape from their lecterns to make it feel more like worship in person.

For Germoso, figuring out which technology to use has been a challenge: “What should we use? Facebook? Zoom? YouTube? Do I use my phone?”

Many pastors made the decision to post their services and time together in the simplest ways that their people connect.

We chose Zoom because of the recording features and the ability to email links quickly,” Radcliffe notes. “We had to find something that was compatible for both Android and Apple users.”

For a number of pastors, this transition has come with a steep learning curve. Several pastors reflected to us that they were simply not trained for times like this. “As much as I LOVE learning new things, this has been exhausting trying to figure out,” says TenClay. “Most of this is outside my day-to-day skill set.”

Kevin Yurk agrees. Yurk is director of worship arts, congregational life, and community engagement at Vriesland Church in Zeeland, Michigan. Vriesland doesn’t normally stream worship and has limited technological equipment, so they’ve had to think creatively about how to use the tools they have. “[We have] no equipment to stream, so we have to think outside of the box about how to use our existing set up and tools we already have to provide the best quality resources that we can in this moment,” says Yurk.

[Watch this video to hear how Yurk is using the tools he has to create online worship experiences.](#)

What has been encouraging to you in the process?

Despite the challenges, online worship has led to some nice surprises. Nelms was excited about “seeing” people join a virtual service that had not set foot in their physical location. “It surprised me to see how many people showed up online that I had been inviting over the past year,” he says.

Several pastors say they appreciate the willingness of their congregation to try something new. And some are just grateful for the ability to “see” their congregants in a time of being physically distanced. “It was amazing to just see people’s faces again,” says Anna Radcliffe.

For Rae Starkenburg, worship director of Calvary on 8th Street in Holland, Michigan, it has been a blessing to use the interactive nature of live online worship to respond to prayer needs. Her church has been worshiping on Facebook Live. Congregants can write prayer requests in the comments and receive prayer right away. Her church has also kept the Facebook Live open after the sermon to allow for “coffee and cookies.” This time for members to chat with one another helps to keep the feeling of unity and community alive.

Starkenburg’s church approached online worship more like a typical service at first, but their worship has had to evolve in order to comply with stricter physical distancing guidelines. [Starkenburg shares more about her church’s experience with online worship and offers additional advice on adapting worship for Facebook Live in this video.](#)

Any advice for pastors who want to try

online worship?

1. Try it, and see what works.

It is okay to not be perfect. And it is okay to try something that would not have worked in the past. “If I would have tried to put something up earlier this year for our youth or for the congregation, it would not have worked,” said TenClay.

Germoso agrees. “Just try it, and learn from your mistakes.”

2. Remember your audience.

Whether it’s Zoom for City Chapel, continuing a rhythm for Chosen Generation, or switching platforms to make it more accessible like the Grove, online worship is about connecting. Resist trying to recreate what the church down the road is doing. It is about meeting your church’s needs in the capacity you’ve been given. Tim TenClay says, “Figure out what your congregation needs, and do what you can to try and meet them.”

3. Be creative.

Will there be kids watching? Maybe ask some family friendly questions that can be discussed together. A less tech-savvy congregation? Send out the Scripture and maybe notes on how to connect via postal mail to your members. Try speaking from your pulpit or your porch. Invite other voices. Cedric Nelms reminds us that creativity is part of the call that God has placed on all of our lives. “Now might be the time to put all those so-called crazy ideas into action!”

Jim Keat, digital minister of Riverside Church in New York City encourages churches to look for new opportunities to reach out to the congregation and beyond. “What are the different things that you could do because of this technology? Explore the unique

possibilities that come native to this online context.” Some examples he gives include story time, where pastors read a story to the families, or a mid-day prayer and Scripture reading.

Online worship tutorials and tips

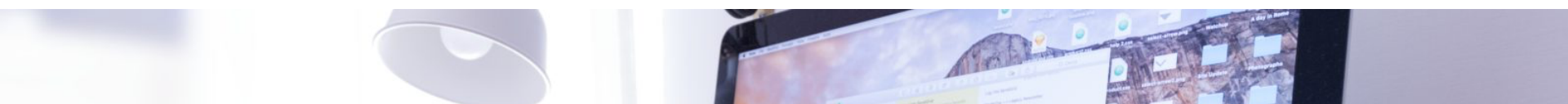
Rae Starckenburg, Calvary on 8th in Holland, MI

Kevin Yurk, Vriesland Church in Zeeland, MI

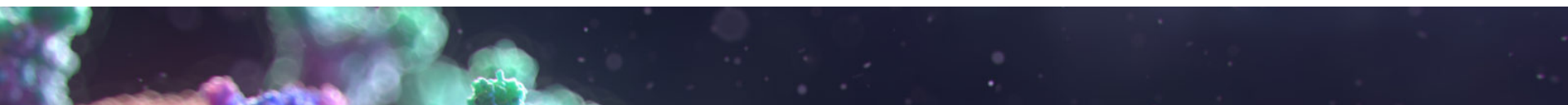
Jim Keat, Riverside Church, New York City

Additional resources and support

The Super Basic, Low-Budget Guide to Livestreaming for Churches



How Should We Use Technology under Quarantine?



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About the author



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