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Tools, strategies for online worship vary among churches

by Tess Schoonhoven, posted Monday, March 23, 2020 (one month ago)

NASHVILLE (BP) -- Transitioning to an online format for church services has brought challenges for many congregations, as they grapple with technology limits and handling a new era of needs in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.



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For many congregations, Sunday (March 22) was the second service held fully online. Others held their services online for the first time.

Among those churches livestreaming services for the first time was Heights Baptist Church in Billings, Mont. Joe Dillabaugh, lead pastor of Heights Baptist, said in the past the church has only recorded the audio of services to later post on their website. But using an iPhone, Dillabaugh and a few members of his team were able to livestream the service to their Facebook page.

"It went better than I expected with several families watching together," Dillabaugh said. "Facebook was particularly good because the church could interact and discuss what was going on."

Dillabaugh said he enjoyed seeing many watch the stream who were not consistent attendees of the church, or had moved away in recent years.

"That was a good time of unique fellowship to have them in as a part of worship," Dillabaugh said.

Other pastors are seeking to refine their livestream process for the current situation and are already adjusting sermon content and length to best fit an online audience.

Marc Ira Hooks, pastor of First Baptist Church of Branch in Princeton, Texas, said his main goal with a service livestream is not production quality but for viewers to have as personal a connection as possible.

"We recognize that these days are far from normal, and I don't want to pretend that they are. So, I livestream from my study at the parsonage, virtually inviting viewers into my home," Hooks said. "For me, the most important thing is to stay linked to my congregation."

However, like Dillabaugh, Hooks said he was encouraged to see the sheer number of people tuning into the livestream service.

"It is still too early to tell what kind of impact we are having, but I do know our online audience is far surpassing our regular church attendance because we have widened the net," Hooks said. "It is also confirmation that what I have been telling the church is true -- 'The church is not closed; we have left the building.'"

Hooks said he approached his sermon differently than he would in a physical gathering.

"I think my approach of an intimate, personal, close-up broadcast versus reproducing a worship service experience has worked for us," Hooks said. "However, the attention span of a digital audience is much shorter than that of a live audience. Even though I have cut my messages considerably, I need to make deeper cuts to retain the online audience."

Casey Hough, pastor of Copperfield Church in Houston, said the church's team records the services a day or two in advance to then broadcast on Sunday through a livestream provider.

Hough said with the level of internet traffic, it has been important to find which streaming service best handles the large capacity of viewers.

For Hough, YouTube has been the preferred streaming platform rather than Facebook.

Hough also said he has prepared his home study to be a place where sermons and podcasts can be recorded, in case of an inability to even gather a few people at the church building to record a livestream in the coming weeks.

Cory Thorpe, deacon at first Baptist church in Crawfordville, Fla., also noted some struggles with internet traffic to the livestreamed service.

"We found we had too many devices streaming on WiFi, as we were also going to Facebook Live on two different devices on WiFi, and the quality wasn't great on any of them," Thorpe said.

Sunday (March 22) Thorpe and his team hosted two separate Facebook livestreaming services to attempt to rectify the issue.

Thorpe said FBC plans to bring in better equipment to create a higher-quality online service in the coming weeks.

"We've learned that Facebook Live doesn't like to give up its video to export to YouTube for archival purposes," Thorpe said. "We've learned a lot about different aux cable configurations and how they work with different devices."

Hooks said that as the church gathering in person will be postponed for a while, he does hope to continue to find ways to utilize technology for the mission of the church.

"We want to continue our mission through prayer, small group studies, personal evangelism and even fellowship," Hooks said. "Becoming a digital church will help us do that, but there is still no replacement for the church as a gathered body."

Dillabaugh also said he plans to bring in some upgraded equipment to have a better functioning stream in the following weeks.

By bringing a higher quality camera and extending the stream to the church's website, as not all members have Facebook, Dillabaugh hopes to maintain a higher-quality livestream that reaches more people.

For some pastors, improving their livestreaming capabilities is a permanent area of growth that will continue to aide their ministry, even when the church can return to its regular meeting environment.

"I'd like to use this experience as a means to record/livestream services in the future, after we come back together as the church," Thorpe said. "Doing that well will take more tinkering and more learning as we use this hurdle as an opportunity for technological growth so that we can continue to know Christ and make Christ known in our community."

But for others, the livestream is only a temporary solution.

Michael Cooper, pastor of Grace Community Church in Mabank, Texas, said he is not partial to online services of any format, but in the current situation, values the benefits it can bring.

"We are a normative sized rural church, so online streaming is simply a temporary means until we have the ability to gather together in person," Cooper said. "Once we begin to meet again corporately, I highly doubt we will continue to livestream our sermons. It's just not a priority for us."

As the current environment continues to change, Dillabaugh said it is important to be willing to adjust.

"I'm an Army veteran, and constant change is a part of training for combat, and that's what I am reminded of as we plan to minister in the middle of this pandemic," Dillabaugh said. "Plans will be made and then immediately changed."

Tess Schoonhoven is a Baptist Press staff writer.