



OMJOF DIVSDI SFNBOT B QBOEFNJDZ TIPVME CF WJFXFE BT E  
1FSIBQT UIJT TFFNT PCWXPJDT DPVSDNFT COUFHSBUF P JOF I  
B SFDFOU /FX :PSIBSHNFT FSDUJDMF  
F&JTF TBZJOH UIBU POMJOF DIVSDMJDZ FYTQDSJMNZKTSBSIF OP MF  
EVF UP UIF MBDL PG FNCPEJNFOPW BOE XTFRVZMEV XFBME TJU TFD  
)PXFWFS TVDI B QFSTQFDUJWFBQEUXBOWZRSZPTV S TILPSBEFN UP  
TJHIUFE WJFX PG UIF QBOEFNJDZSBVUPXMMNFD BYQFSDJFOGV T BSF JO  
TRO BU CFTU BOE EJWJTJPO: BUBXPSJQF BUWBJEJFN DEXMMVOH B SF  
DIVSDIFT TIPVME CF VOJUFE DBUDIJOH BO 6CFS PS SFBEJOH n  
"T B DIVSDI MBEFS XIP IBT: ERFUJDBBFCIPQF SJIBU ZPV DBSSZ XJ  
IPVST EVSJOH UIF QBOEFNJDZURFQSVBOMJBUJFEFTWIBOJIO MJOJ MJ  
BOE FEJUJOH POMJOF TFSWJDFGFD PNFEBXQUPIE BXTJGF êHIUJOH  
DBODFS XIP IBT OPU BUUFOEFE TFSWJDFT GPS UXP ZFBST  
m \* êOE UIF JEFB PG DBODFMMJOF WBSXCF JFSTWJDFT OPU POMZ  
DBMMPVT CVU VODBMMFE GPS nF DSJUJRVF UIBU POMJOF TFSW  
'PS UXP ZFBST DIVSDIFT IBWBT XPSOITRZNOHTF+TPWOF CJHHFS QJD  
VT JO QFSTPO PS POMJOF u CVNPEXEFMEOPSUHFNDIOJSDFFET XPSTIJ  
TIPVME HP FWFO GVSUIFS /PU NCFBZMTZPB/TM ERPSF PIONJTOFXPSTIJQQ  
TUBZ CVU XF TIPVME TUBSU UFE NFBZ IBDEBSOMBJONF uD\$VIBOS PCTFS  
HOUT TIPVME CF JOWJUFE UP: CDIBIOHOPTU UP OFF PQFLSIFFDIFF SCVU JU  
3BUIFS UIBO DSFBUJOH B GBMTJFOSJDFWUPPSZCFQXBFIO UOBU T VQ U  
QFSTPO BOE POMJOF QBSUJDDJQBQCFD JNFOMZTUSE EFSJOTHP OIBP XP

UIFSF JT OP MBSHF TDBMF NPWFNF  
\$ISJTUJBOJUZ UP SFQMBDF OPSNBI  
DIVSDI \*OTUFBE POMJOF DIVSDI J  
DIVSDI m BO FYQSFTTJPO PG UIF H  
iDIJMESFO T DIVSDIU UIF UJNF XIF  
OPU TFFO BT B TFQBSBUF DIVSDI C  
TP TIPVME POMJOF TFSWJDFT CFW  
SFQMBDF UIF GVMM DIVSDI FYQFSJ  
NBOZ QBSUT

"O PQQPSUVOJUZ GPS CFUUFS IFB  
&NCPJNFOPW PG JOEJWJEVBMT I  
B MFHJUJNBUF DPODFSO 'FX XPVM  
)VNBO CFJOHT PCWJPVTMZ IBWF C  
BOZPOF EPVCU JU UIF QBOEFNJDZ  
POMZ EP XF IBWF CPEJFT CVU XF  
1SFDJTFMZ CFDBVTF XF BSF FNC  
QSPWJEFT OPU BO PCTUBDMF CVU  
CFUUFS IFBMUI nVT QFSIBQT UIF  
FNCPEJFE QFSTPO JT UP XPSTIJQ

loved ones, or within a bubble, rather than attending a large gathering with various people of unknown vaccination status.

Further, online worship can embrace bodily elements. Some online services incorporate songs (to sing, clap, dance with), sign language, readings, silence, communion, and more. In other words, activity on a screen does not eliminate the body of the viewer. Certainly, screens excel in some areas of communication more than others, but despite obvious limitations, they can still form a bond of closeness.

This is because presence involves far more than physicality. Online educators have known this for decades (dating back to *The Social Psychology of Telecommunications* in 1976), but it's not only educators who know this. Any lonely person can relate. You can be surrounded by people and still be separate. Loneliness, even when physically proximate, can be a disembodied experience.

### A vehicle for more inclusion

Feeling “close” involves engagement, and online services offer unique opportunities to connect. For example, our church uses video submissions from congregants, incorporating different ages, families, personalities, backgrounds, and more. Compared to a “normal” service (i.e., prior to March 2020), such videos allow more diverse voices to be expressed and heard.

Some worry that online services communicate the “implicit” message that embodiment is optional, but this need not be the case. Church leaders, of all people, know how to communicate the implicit. Thus, the warning should be well heeded, and churches should shape online experiences into an invitation – not into dualism but holism. After all, we are embodied as individuals but also embodied *together*.

As with most of our pandemic debates, the minority gets left behind. As has been known for months, some cannot attend due to health conditions. Yet, in most of the pandemic debates, the most vulnerable receive a brief mention, perhaps a sentence, maybe a paragraph – and are soon forgotten.

When appropriate and safe, visiting the vulnerable is welcome, but even still, most cannot receive visitors yet. Further, if the homebound would benefit from an online gathering, why remove access? The vulnerable have already suffered enough; we could



Photos: Dave Wiltse



better spend our time giving rather than taking away from them.

While easy for healthy people to forget, online gatherings may not be as “isolating” to others as may be thought; for some, they may provide the only opportunity to see, hear, and emotionally feel all week. A quick glance at TikTok will introduce you to individuals of all kinds, some of whom have physical or health limitations. In short, *your* online experience may not be the same as everyone else’s.

### Developing community

In this debate, we must not confuse “assembly” with “assembly in a building.” Indeed, Christians should not forsake the assembly, but during a pandemic, that need not be inside. As churches have thought creatively, assembly can happen at public parks, church parking lots, even boats – and the same goes for gathering online. For as previous research has shown, online experiences can in fact develop community, especially aspects such as encouragement.

Lastly, some may forget that the pandemic does not strike people fairly. Depending on age, geography, class, politics, and a host of other factors, some individuals face greater danger from the pandemic than others. Even now, parents of young children struggle with knowing what to do, and young families comprise a significant portion of church membership. So any policy, program, or other church decision should consider all believers, especially those who may suffer.

Jesus came for the least of these (Matt. 25:40) – the weak, the vulnerable, the fearful, the sick – which is why Jesus would favor not a singular form of institutionalism, but creative methods to reach all people.

So let us not backtrack, learning nothing from the pandemic. Instead, let us lean into our context, loving not some but *all* – for “this is the way to love God and our neighbors” (ironically, the very phrase the *Times* article used to argue for dropping online services).

#### NOTE

1 [www.nytimes.com/2022/01/30/opinion/church-online-services-covid.html?referringSource=articleShare](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/30/opinion/church-online-services-covid.html?referringSource=articleShare)



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# ‘We are not alone’

Fellowship members reflect on the past two pandemic years, sharing moments of hope and inspiration, sorrow and loss, offering lessons learned along the way. ▶

*(continued from the previous issue)*