



REACHING OUT

Why Jesus Would Love Online Church

by Dr. Joel Jupp

*Just as ‘children’s church’ ... is not seen as a separate church but **part of the church**, so should online services be viewed.*

Online church remains a necessity. Perhaps this seems obvious to some, but a recent *New York Times* article¹ argues otherwise, saying that online church is physically wrong (due to the lack of embodiment) and “should” cease. However, such a perspective not only takes a short-sighted view of the pandemic but will cause confusion (at best) and division (at worst) at a time when churches should be united.

As a church leader who has dedicated over 4,000 hours during the pandemic to planning, designing, and editing online services – and with a wife fighting cancer, who has not attended services for two years – I find the idea of cancelling online services not only callous but uncalled for.

For two years, churches have been saying “Join us in person or online,” but I would argue churches should go even further. Not only should “or online” stay, but we should start to say, “and online.” Congregants should be invited to both, not one or the other. Rather than creating a false dichotomy between in-person and online participants, ministry during the

pandemic should be viewed as a spectrum, within which churches integrate offline and online experiences.

Online experiences are no longer isolated. This is not 1995, when you would sit secluded at a desktop and wait for your 56k modem to connect. In contrast, online experiences are integrated into “normal” life – video calling a relative, paying for dinner, catching an Uber, or reading *The New York Times* – using a phone that you carry with you everywhere. The realization that “online life is real life” has even become a podcast.

The viewer decides

The critique that online services somehow diminish worship misses the bigger picture. The internet modified, not diminished, worship. (God is not so measly as to be “less worshipped” during the pandemic.) As Marshall McLuhan observed, the medium changes the experience, but it does not necessarily improve or ruin it – that’s up to the users to decide.

Precisely, the decision to worship is ours, and there is no large-scale movement within orthodox Christianity to replace normal church with online church. Instead, online church is an activity of the church – an expression of the greater body. Just as “children’s church” (the time when children gather) is not seen as a separate church but part of the church, so should online services be viewed. Online will not replace the full church experience, but it is one part of many parts.

An opportunity for better health

Embodiment of individuals, of course, remains a legitimate concern. Few would argue with that. Human beings obviously have bodies, and should anyone doubt it, the pandemic has reminded us. Not only do we have bodies, but we have fragile bodies.

Precisely *because* we are embodied, the internet provides not an obstacle but an opportunity for better health. Thus, perhaps the best way to be an embodied person is to worship safely alone, with



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



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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)