

Developing the Divine Service for Greater Engagement Online
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Dear Friends in Christ,

Last Sunday my wife and I attended worship online. It was a live stream of one of our local churches. The Word was proclaimed, prayers were lifted up, and praises were sung. However, worshiping through live streaming was certainly different than gathering in the sanctuary. It was even different from watching a service on TV.

I noticed many worshipers felt free to post comments to each other and to all of us throughout the service. The comments were almost always completely connected to the service itself, but my attention was pulled to the comments while still trying to focus on the main content of the service. I also found myself tempted to have the service on but to try to multi-task during the service as I often do with other forms of media these days.

The face-to-face, “family of Christ assembled in one building” worship service is a different medium of communication than is each follower of Jesus sitting in their own home and virtually participating in worship through a medium that is designed for interaction.

As most, if not all, worship services we attend in the coming weeks will take place through the medium of live streaming or pre-recorded online casts, what are some ways that we can adjust how we conduct the Divine Service that will better engage the at-home worshipers?

District Mission Executives from around the Synod along with Pastor Chris Paavola from Lutheran Hour Ministries share the following ideas:

Treat the Start of the Service as Your Narthex

Often before a service begins, pastors, greeters, and ushers are in the narthex, greeting people by name and interacting with them, which isn't happening in a live stream broadcast. Take a few moments at the start of the service and greet people by name as they log in to the service. This affirms their presence among God's people in worship, and gives a simple way for a pastor to provide worshipers with a personal touch of care.

When Possible, Utilize Laity for the Parts of Service They Would Normally Do

Does an Elder share announcements before or after the service? Ask them to pre-record announcements and play them at that point in the live stream or pre-recorded service. If you have lay readers, ask a few if they could possibly pre-record themselves reading the appointed readings. Then when it's time for the readings in the live stream or pre-recorded service, edit the reader in. If you have individuals who normally sing, ask them to sing the selected hymns or songs at home and embed them in that part of the service.

If ushers gather prayer requests, ask tech-comfortable lay members to monitor the live streaming service for you and have them gather the requests so that you can lift them up in prayer during the service.

Many of us are new to having services online, and worship leaders may not feel tech-capable of making these things happen. However, if there is a tech-comfortable member or two in the congregation, they may be honored and willing to help make these things, which recreate the way services happen when we're together, happen.

Ask for Reactions to the Scripture Readings

When the Scriptures are read, ask online worshipers to react to the reading. It can be as simple as saying, "Viewers, please post what word or phrase from that reading of God's Word stood out for you?" Feel free to take a moment or two and acknowledge the responses.

Include Response-oriented Content in the Sermon

Asking worshipers to share a response to a question at the start of a sermon helps center worshipers to focus on the message. It could be as simple as asking as your message begins, "Could you, in one or two words, share right now how your week has gone?" or introducing one of the main faith themes your sermon will address by saying, "When I say the word 'grace' (or 'mercy' or 'forgiveness') could you post what comes to your mind?"

Again, take a moment to interact with one or two comments as they are posted. This too, will help worshipers stay focused on what you say next in your message.

Pastor Paavola also shared that having the worshipers make comments regarding the message is noted in the algorithms of media platforms like Facebook and boosts the attention this service will get.

Post All the Ways Worshipers Can Give Offerings

During the time in the service where you would normally gather tithes and offerings, find a way to post in the service all the ways that the at-home worshipers can continue to respond to God's grace in their lives and support the Word and Sacrament ministry of the congregation. Where can they find your online giving? Remind worshipers they can mail in a check. Post if there's a secure drop box at the church where offerings can be dropped off.

Where Possible, Treat the Service as if It Is for One Person

As an example, when it comes time for the sermon or to pray, rather than stand where you normally would in the chancel area, try sitting directly in front of the camera. This may seem strange as it is not the way we normally lead worship, but this makes it a more intimate, personal engagement for the worshipers who are sitting in front their screens and may better hold their attention.

Live by Grace in Trying New Things

Like so many things we're doing in these early days of the coronavirus pandemic, live streaming worship services on interactive media platforms is new to most of us. As you try new things and become creative in leading worship through this medium, know that not everything you try or is suggested to you will work for your given set of circumstances. If something doesn't work, let it go, rejoice in the grace of Christ and in the joy of knowing that He uses us in spite of ourselves. Then, feel free to try something else, trusting that our Lord will use us to His good purposes even as He has before the coronavirus changed our world.

Do you have a creative way to connect worshipers to an online service or would you like to explore this topic further? Reach me at kris.whitby@nidlcms.org