

## **Hybrid Church** *A Way Forward for Church Leaders*

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In reflecting on what a post-pandemic church will look like, I was struck by a comment made during our online clergy conference for the Diocese of Massachusetts this year by Dr. Melissa Perrin, a clinical psychologist from Chicago. She talked about the distinction between resuscitation and resurrection. It's not a new concept, but it's one that feels particularly relevant as we begin to look towards the future.

To resuscitate someone, or in this case an institution, is to bring it back to what it once was. It's to revive something and attempt to return it to its former state. Resurrection, however, is different. It acknowledges that after a life-altering experience, things will never be the same. Resurrection by definition implies death. Certain things must die in order for new life to take hold.

Following, say, a pandemic in which everything we've known and clung to for generations has been flipped over, you can attempt a resuscitation. But even if you're able to temporarily resuscitate an organization, it will eventually still fade away. That's simply the nature of resuscitation — it's not a permanent solution.

Resurrection, rather than resuscitation, is the model I believe the church must embrace in order to move forward in a post-pandemic world. As much as we might hope for it to be so, things will never fully return to the way they once were — not fully anyway. And so we must reflect upon that which has died, name it, grieve it, and then embrace new models of being church in the days, months, and years ahead.

As disconcerting as this may be, there is hope in resurrection. There's a reason resurrection is the very bedrock of our faith. Resurrection can be as scary as it is life-giving. Think about those first disciples who came face-to-face with the resurrected Jesus. They were terrified! Indeed, at one point they thought they had seen a ghost. But once they embraced and moved past the fear, a new way of being unfolded before their very eyes; a new freedom rooted in salvation emerged. This is helpful to keep in mind as we enter what may well be a destabilizing period of death and resurrection.

### **Reflect & Consider**

1. *Think about and name your core pre-pandemic ministries.*
2. *Of these, what did they look like during the pandemic? What was unchanged? What was held onto but offered in new ways? What was let go of?*

## **BEING CHURCH IN NEW WAYS**

In a radical and often jarring way, the pandemic broke open for us what it means to be a church community. Many of our traditional assumptions were flipped as we literally turned a brick and mortar institution into a virtual one overnight. At the parish I serve in suburban Boston, on March 8, 2020, we held a raucous in-person service in our beautiful and sacred worship space. One week later we had turned our chapel into a makeshift studio and live-streamed our service for the very first time over Facebook Live.

Due to circumstances beyond our control we, along with parishes everywhere, overturned the notion that church goes must be physically present to worship. Sure, televangelists have exploited this for years, often to great financial gain, but this was new for us. And it was hard, in large part because of our sacramental and incarnational theology. Our understanding of community is flesh and blood; we physically touch things to bless and receive them; we build up the Body of Christ that is the church by singing together and hugging one another and sharing the Eucharist and drinking coffee afterwards.

You take all those things away which we highly value and...we were still able to be a community. It reminds me of the great Seussian revelation in *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*: “Maybe Christmas doesn’t come from a store. Maybe Christmas, perhaps, means a little bit more.” Or in this case, “Maybe Church doesn’t come from a building. Maybe Church, perhaps, means a little bit more.”

Of course, online worship doesn’t resonate for everyone and there are some in our midst who are unable to access worship this way. And yet for the vast majority of people, we have been able to stay connected through online worship and social media and Zoom and electronic communications. Not to mention such old-fashioned communication techniques as postcards, letters, and phone calls. As much as we’ve ached to be together in person for the past year we, like Christian communities all over the world, got creative to hold the community together.

Perhaps the knowledge that this time together-yet-apart is a temporary fast rather than a permanent feature of our common life has helped us make it through. But it’s important to stop and reflect upon what we’ve learned and think about what lessons we will hold onto moving forward.

These brief pages don’t attempt to provide all the answers, but rather seek to invite the questions. Each context is different and things that work for one community, may not translate to another. Still, there are some commonalities and deep truths that are emerging as we collectively seek a way forward not just for the means of self-preservation but for the very transformation and renewal of the Church.

The open question of resuscitation vs. resurrection demands that we ask ourselves whether we will seek to return to the model of “the way it’s always been” or whether we will allow the Spirit to break open our hearts to new ways of being church? I’d like to explore embracing a model of

Hybrid Church that blends the traditional (music/stained glass) with the innovative (interactive/online). I'm increasingly convinced that we must be a church that metaphorically welcomes people in suits and ties in person, and people wearing bathrobes and drinking coffee online. If we strike the right balance technologically and spiritually, I don't believe these are mutually exclusive.

### **Reflect & Consider**

1. *What new ministries emerged during the pandemic?*
2. *Of these, will you retain them in some form moving forward? Were any pandemic-specific ministries that will naturally fade away when you fully regather?*
3. *What pre-pandemic ministries should/could be let go of because they are no longer essential to your parish's mission?*

### **THE CHANGING COMMUNITY**

One of the most visible ways that parish life is changing revolves around what it means to be part of a parish community. No longer is being connected to the parish rooted exclusively in geography. Here at St. John's in Hingham, Massachusetts, we now have faithful, regular worship participants who live hundreds and even thousands of miles away. They tune in to our Sunday live-stream and add their prayers. Some give financially to the church. One woman who tunes in every week from Pittsburgh has joined our new Prayer Shawl Ministry. I hear similar stories from clergy and lay leaders across the country — and it's not just the clergy's mothers who are tuning in (though in our case, this is true).

This presents an opportunity for parishes to reach more people (evangelism!), but how do we engage them in the ministries of the church beyond worship? How are we making them feel connected to the parish and to God? How are they made to feel like full members invested in the ministry of the church? How do we get to *know* them?

The underlying question here is do we even *want* to get to know them? I would suggest that this is one of the opportunities of our brave, new, post-pandemic digital world. Connecting with people beyond our walls has the potential to enrich us, as well as those who decide to join us on our particular journey of faith. If we choose to value their voices and experiences, it will make our community more diverse. Some may say, why invest valuable resources in those we'll never physically see? But, in so many ways, that describes faith itself.

This all gets to the sticky question of church membership. It's already confusing because, partly in an attempt to be welcoming, we don't place demands on people. Basically if you attend church and you're in the parish directory, you're considered a member. Financial stewardship is nice and it's a powerful sign of commitment, but it's not a "requirement." Often church membership is in the eye of the beholder — someone who comes to Christmas Eve services every few years may well consider themselves parishioners and assume we'll officiate at their daughter's wedding or their mother's funeral (which we most likely will). In other words, parish membership was complicated to begin with; our digital world makes it even more so.

Reflecting on questions about how to engage those beyond our physical location touches on an aspect of newcomer ministry we haven't ever addressed. We need a digital newcomer ministry (or a team of digital ushers); a group to reach out to those who show up online, invite them to sign up for e-news, get to know them, and check in on their level of engagement. Are they just visiting? Are they seeking a deeper connection? What opportunities exist for such members of our broader community? How do we get their information so we can invite them to receive our communications, participate in certain ministries, and invite them to support the church financially? How do we make them feel as if they are fully members of the community rather than just on the periphery? The danger is creating a tiered system of church membership where digital members are treated like second class citizens.

On the surface, these are primarily tactical or database considerations, but the underlying issue is sharing the love of Jesus that exists in our hearts and resides in our communities with more people. Not to "add pledging units" or increase the parish budget, but to share this gift of abundant grace with which we've been entrusted. In order to do this effectively, Paul used the technology at hand: letters. We, too, are able to use the technology at hand: digital media.

### **Reflect & Consider**

1. *Many parishes have experienced virtual newcomers. How have you welcomed and engaged them?*
2. *What strategies might you employ to draw them deeper into the life of the community?*

### **THE NEW DIGITAL WORLD**

In his book *10 Lessons of a Post-Pandemic World*, Fareed Zakaria argues that unlike the Roaring 20's which followed the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic, when everyone went back to socializing and shopping and working as usual, things are different with the coronavirus pandemic. Over the last 20 years we have rapidly moved towards a fully digital economy. You could contend that the coronavirus has hastened the inevitable by forcing us to see that, if you have the resources, it's possible to live and work in an almost exclusively digital world. For instance, Covid-19 has accelerated the trend of digital retail overtaking brick and mortar retail. If we're at all paying attention, similar forces are at play in the church.

This isn't to say the church will ever be fully digital. Human beings crave sacred space and physical touch — this time has made that abundantly clear. Our faith tradition, being rooted in Christ's incarnation, is particularly drawn to sacramental acts that demand physical interaction. Which is why you'll never be able to double click for salvation or touch the screen to be healed.

But this doesn't mean we can afford to neglect the digitalization of the world. And this pandemic has, out of necessity, forced people to find even more comfort in the digital world. From Zoom meetings to ordering groceries online to remote school to tele-health to online worship, we are doing things in ways we never could have imagined barely a year ago. That's a seismic behavioral shift! And when it's all over we, as a church, can't just stick our heads back in the

sand and pretend it didn't happen and attempt to shove the digital genie back into the bottle. Unfortunately, many parishes will do this, but it will be to their detriment and likely lead to eventual death. That's just the reality of being an aging, analog spiritual institution in an increasingly secular digital world.

### **Reflect & Consider**

1. *How has your own life - personal and professional - moved into a more digital arena over the past year? What has been the most surprising change for you?*

### **HYBRID WORSHIP EXPERIENCE**

No longer can the church exclusively be a place where people walk in, are handed a bulletin, and revel in the sacred space. It will always be that, but the pandemic has shown that it can be, and already is, so much more. By investing in the infrastructure to live-stream for the long haul, we are already proclaiming that worship will no longer exclusively be an in-person or online experience, but an intentionally hybrid model that allows us to connect with those in the local community and beyond.

Indeed, the hybrid model won't just be a geographically near and far scenario. There will be a hyper local hybrid version of church that sees every Sunday as a mix of locals in the church and locals watching online. This may be for a variety of reasons — inclement weather, illness, time constraints, vacation, Sunday soccer games, or even a preference for attending church while drinking coffee. We've already seen a number of our own parishioners participating in online services from second homes — something they would never have before been able to do.

Will this mean fewer people in the pews on Sunday but a larger overall attendance reach? Perhaps. Though I also think fully embracing this model will draw others into our orbit in surrounding communities. But in order to do this effectively, we need to determine who we are as a hybrid church, ie. what is our online identity and does this shift anything compared with our stone-or-brick-or-wooden-church-on-a-hill-or-off-the highway-or-downtown identity?

One noticeable liturgical change will be the need to acknowledge the fact that there are more people worshipping than those in the building can physically see. This may mean adding a message of welcome to those in person and online at the outset of every liturgy, as well as a nod to online worshipers during the announcements. This doesn't need to be awkward and people will soon get used to it.

In the past, I know I've glared at people who take out cellphones and intrusively snap pictures during holy moments like baptisms or funerals. During this pandemic, as families have not been able to fully be together for important life passages and sacramental rites, I've not only invited pictures and videos and FaceTiming, I've encouraged it. I do wonder whether this Sacramental Streaming will become a norm, or at least a more accepted practice. Also, as more parishes have streaming capabilities, maybe this is now offered for wedding and funerals — for a fee, as people are needed to run this.

## Reflect & Consider

1. *Reflect on the ways your church has offered online worship. What has worked? What hasn't?*
2. *What have people liked/not liked about online worship?*

## ONLINE IDENTITY

Nearly every every church has been doing church online during the pandemic. Some can't wait to be done with it all and never do online services again. Others are embracing technology as a normative part of church life moving forward.

But with thousands of churches streaming services, the opportunity for “church shopping” is bewildering. A visitor isn't relegated to a handful of churches in their area. There's a dizzying array of choices out there — a veritable buffet — from the high production values of the Washington National Cathedral right down to a 30-person Zoom church and everything and every denomination in between. Geography no longer matters, which makes a parish's online identity even more important to think through.

What is yours exactly? What makes your parish unique as an online worship experience? In our own case, I'd like to think we're a welcoming, progressive, Episcopal parish, formal in some ways but accessible and invitational in others. But what makes our online presence unique? I'd really like to hear what it is about St. John's online that gets people coming back — I'm talking about our own folks, but particularly those who have been tuning in regularly from afar. Anecdotally, I hear that it's authentic, inspiring, slightly homespun (aka not over-produced), but still reverent, invitational, interactive, and fun. How do we build on these traits? What will this look like when we're streaming services with people in the building itself and we're back to processions and choirs and communion? Will people still tune in when the service is over an hour instead of 35-40 minutes?

These are the questions each parish community must ask themselves as they plan for the future. Again, every context will be different, but if there isn't a compelling online identity that sets a church apart, it will likely fade away. This sounds like a new issue, but it's really not. I once consulted with a struggling parish and the first question I asked was, “What is your parish's mission? What are you passionate about as a community of faith?” The only answer I ever got was basically, “We have services at 8 and 10 am.” Within the year, I attended the service in which the bishop officially closed the parish. A church without a compelling identity and mission statement rooted in Jesus will die, it's a matter of when, not if.

One of the unique features of online worship at St. John's throughout the pandemic has been the 10-minute live pre-game show. It's an informal conversation with the clergy that begins at 9:50 am. It was rooted in practicality — we wanted to give people a window before the service started to log on and get settled.

While there are some who will never connect with it (I tell them that's fine — just log on at 10 am and you'll avoid it), many others somewhat embarrassingly tell me it's their favorite part of the service. Why is that? The personal connection with the clergy? An informal, invitational, accessible time before the formality of the liturgy? And when we're in the model of some in church and some online (truly hybrid), do we keep this in some format before the liturgy begins? Turn it into a pre-recorded option? I'm not sure, but when it comes to online church, the personality of the clergy and worship leaders, for better or worse, must be considered.

While liturgy must always point to God and we certainly don't want to push a clergy cult of personality, we also can't minimize the importance/impact of the parish clergy in all of this. At one level, this is nothing new — some are drawn to a parish because they like the sermons or just connect with the clergy. Others leave because they don't. This has been amplified, I think, with online church as the clergy are literally front and center and speaking directly to people at home.

Part of what makes the pre-game show work at St. John's is the chemistry between me and my associate rector, the Rev. Jacqueline Clark. It simply wouldn't work if we weren't genuinely fond of one another and the relationship wasn't founded upon mutual respect. If authenticity wasn't part of the equation, the whole thing would tank.

I mention our pre-game show as an example of contextual online identity. Think about your own worship experience. What stands out? What's the vibe? What works? What doesn't? Hopefully your online identity isn't "We have services at 8 and 10 am."

### **Reflect & Consider**

1. *How would you characterize your church's online identity?*
2. *Are there ways your congregation presents itself online that are unique?*
3. *What are you seeking to convey through online worship?*

### **INTERACTIVE**

One of the great joys of online worship for me has been participating in the Prayers of the People. As a large, formal church in stiff-upper-lip New England, we simply weren't ever going to have prayer intentions called out loud or added to the liturgy — it's neither practical nor our style. But with online worship, the chat on Facebook Live is full of prayer intentions! We literally *see* the prayers of our community being lifted up to God. This is not only incredibly moving, it's also a way of knowing one another in deeper, heart-driven ways. Episcopal worship in general, not just specifically at St. John's, has never been particularly interactive, yet this is a key component of online access and engagement.

How might we retain some of this when we move to a hybrid model? Maybe it's just a feature of the online component — we can't really call out people's prayers if half the congregation is in person and half online.

But it does make you wonder what are some other ways we might make online church more interactive? Real-time responses and/or feedback during the sermon or music hint at this, but could go much deeper. This may make the church (clergy/musicians) more vulnerable in some ways, but interaction deepens connection which deepens commitment.

Parishes have been using a variety of platforms for online worship, from Facebook to YouTube to Zoom. There are advantages and disadvantages to all of these. In our case we use Facebook and our website. The problem is, from an interactivity perspective, only people watching through Facebook Live can leave comments in real time. Those who watch the stream through our website are unable to comment. This effectively locks out a portion of the congregation from being able to interact, which doesn't feel right.

I realize this is a technical question, as we seek a platform for live-streaming that allow everyone to participate by leaving comments. But the broader issue is how will we continue to invite engagement through interactivity? We've witnessed how interaction deepens communal connection and it would be a shame to cut it off as quickly as it emerged.

One way to maximize parishioner interaction and engagement might be through building a parish-specific smart-phone app. This would need some deep thought and there would invariably be some who cringe at seeing smartphones used in the pews. Still, interaction and real-time feedback is an ongoing feature in the entrepreneurial tech world. Perhaps there's a place for it in worship.

While it's possible now, an app could also be used to highlight the fact that worship is not just at a particular time on Sunday morning, but is accessible on demand. Coaching a soccer game at 10 am? Skiing all weekend? Fine. Watch worship at 1:22 pm on Monday or whenever you're free.

### **Reflect & Consider**

1. *Have people experienced your online worship as interactive?*
2. *What about your pre-pandemic worship?*
3. *Is interactivity in worship something you'd like to cultivate? Why or why not?*

### **EXPANDING THE REACH**

One thing parishes rarely budget for or invest in is any form of advertising. Well, there used to be the weekly print ad in the religion section of the newspaper, but that's largely of a bygone era. I see this not as "marketing" per se but evangelism — spreading the good news of Jesus by inviting people to your parish. If you feel you have a good (hold your nose!) "product," why wouldn't you want to share it with more people?

With a compelling message, you can always invite locals to your parish through targeted Facebook ads. But you can also reach out to draw people to participate in our online community. One advantage of online ministry is you never run out of virtual pews! Unless the server crashes, there is always more room at the proverbial inn.

There's another opportunity here that's rooted in a perhaps unfortunate reality. As smaller churches fade away, their demise hastened by the pandemic, there may well be Christians who identify as progressive in small towns across the country. Maybe they're looking for an online community that aligns with their values? Perhaps they've gotten used to online church or want to supplement their own in-person worship experiences in order to deepen their faith?

Facebook ads can target people to such a degree that you can identify people who may enjoy and find value in online life at your parish. And such an investment offers a real-time feedback loop to gauge effectiveness. Letting go of preconceived notions about marketing and embracing the invitational possibilities is certainly a culture shift for most Episcopalians. But thinking creatively about ways to invite people to experience God's love is one of the opportunities of a post-pandemic church.

### **Reflect & Consider**

1. *How does your parish get the word out to those beyond your walls?*
2. *Has the pandemic caused you to change your approach to reaching others? In what ways?*

### **HYBRID MINISTRY BEYOND SUNDAY**

For the past nearly dozen years or so since I've been at St. John's, I've said Morning Prayer in the parlor outside my office at 8:45 am. Usually it's just me and one or two other people. Since moving this brief, 15-minute service to Zoom, we've been averaging 10-12 people Monday through Friday. This is an amazing expansion of ministry and one we'll continue to offer online even when we're back in person.

There's no reason this can't be a model for other hybrid mid-week opportunities. Why not stream the Wednesday 10 am Eucharist, for instance? There's a spiritual hunger out there that can be addressed without people having to be physically present.

It's also worth considering what educational opportunities and committee meetings should either embrace a hybrid model or remain exclusively online. As an example, Vestry attendance has never been better over the past year. We've had everyone present at virtually every single meeting. I hear this is a similar phenomenon throughout the church. Yes, tough conversations are more difficult over Zoom and I wouldn't want to forego in-person meetings. But if the agenda is light or without foreseeable controversy, it may well be worth connecting over Zoom some months. It's convenient, and everyone can be present even if they wouldn't otherwise physically be able to attend.

To do this right, will take an investment in technology infrastructure and a continued suspension of the way-we've-always-done-things attitude. Thinking creatively through a hybrid filter has the potential to unlock all sorts of possibilities. Some things will work, some won't, but it's worth examining all of our ministries through this lens. Partly to draw in others from beyond our

geographic area and partly as a convenience for local folks. There are people in our community, for instance, who because of circumstances can't physically come to church for a particular meeting or session (child care issues, weather, time constraint, whatever) but would still want to participate.

I'm not a big fan of the contrived word "phygital" but the concept behind it resonates. It comes out of business culture and refers to the way that companies strive for a seamless flow between their physical space and digital services. In a hybrid model, the church must be attentive to this integration of the brick and mortar experience with online opportunities. In other words, what is the interplay between the in-person experience and the digital one? How do they complement and serve one another rather than being separate entities?

### **Reflect & Consider**

1. *How have you used technology for midweek ministries?*
2. *In what form will this continue, or not, post-pandemic?*

### **SUNDAY SERVICE SCHEDULE**

It's worth thinking about what Sunday morning will look like post-pandemic. Traditionally, we've had three Sunday services at 8 & 10 am and 5 pm. Does this make sense moving forward? And if so, do we only live-stream the 10 am service? Does the 8 o'clock service remain our "analog" service of in-person only worship? What about live-streaming our more informal Sunday evening service? Since we hold that service in the parish hall we'd need to install a new camera system, plus have a rota of people willing to run the live-stream.

I mention my own context to encourage you to think about your own situation. Would your parish embrace installing a screen in the worship space where in-person attendees can view comments from those watching online and even add their own in real time? This would potentially be a radical reshaping and would take some serious tech expertise and liturgical creativity.

### **Reflect & Consider**

1. *What was your Sunday service schedule during the pandemic and how did this differ, if at all, from your previous schedule?*
2. *Looking ahead, are there any reasons to make changes to your service schedule once you're fully regathered?*

### **LITURGY ON DEMAND**

One of the profound lessons of this time has been a recognition that worship and faith formation doesn't just have to happen on Sunday mornings. When I was growing up, if you missed your favorite cartoon on Saturday morning (The Jetsons!) you had to wait an entire week to watch it again. We're conditioned to think that if we miss church on Sunday morning we have to wait a week to get a dose of spirituality. Thanks to the internet and the rise of digital ministry, this is no longer true. When we regather, will we remember this lesson or return to old habits?

On social media recently, I asked (without judgment!) whether people who watched liturgy after the fact or in a pre-recorded format ever fast forward past certain parts. Many do! For some, online worship is all about the sermon. For others it's about everything BUT the sermon. For still others all they care about is the music.

This may not be something we encourage, but if it's happening anyway, is it worth slicing up the content to offer on-demand viewing, at least after the fact? Following a Sunday service, we could pull out the sermon or the choir anthem and offer them as separate files for people on the go or if someone wants to catch the sermon alone on Sunday afternoon for a quick shot of inspiration.

### **Reflect & Consider**

1. *How might your parish benefit from thinking about digital content through the on-demand lens?*

### **DIGITAL CREATIVITY**

One of the things we've seen during this time of online church is the ability to be creative with technology. There are certain things we'd never have been able to do as effectively in person. Examples include parishioner slide shows, Youth Group skits, out-of-town guest preachers, online Christmas pageants, baptisms in the ocean, dance contests on social media. I'm sure you can list a host of creative ideas you've experimented with.

But if we agree that online worship/formation isn't fully satisfying, how can we retain some of this creative spirit in an intentionally hybrid model? How can we encourage digital creativity without burning out clergy, staff, and volunteers trying to manage both in-person and online worship and learning experiences for the congregation?

### **Reflect & Consider**

1. *What are some ways in which online creativity has been embraced during this time?*
2. *How might this spirit of creativity be embraced in the future?*

### **DIGITAL MINISTRY TEAM**

If we're looking at new models and new ways of being church, we by definition need to examine our staffing and volunteer structure. Perhaps we need to create and fund a new position of Digital Missioner. This person would be responsible for attending to the ways we engage with people online and help us to think strategically rather than haphazardly about the ways we do this.

Digital engagement is partly about our public face but also about how we maximize the online experience — for worship and formation — and by serving as a bridge between our in-person ministries/committees and our virtual ones. There are technical skills involved as well as a deep understanding of and commitment to new forms of ministry.

This person would lead a team of Digital Ushers, charged with welcoming and inviting and connecting with those who join us online. The role would also involve serving as the Cyber Verger, leading a volunteer Stream Team trained to run and produce the worship live-stream each week.

Whatever the mix of staff and volunteers here, the key is having someone in place responsible for and accountable to the larger vision of embracing digital ministry at the parish level.

### **Reflect & Consider**

1. *Who has primarily been responsible for online ministry?*
2. *Is this a sustainable model or will you need to think about staffing and a volunteer team? What would this look like in your context?*

### **Home Practices**

One important lesson we've learned from this time is the importance of home practices. These would be defined as devotional practices done at home rather than being relegated to church. In a sense, anything we do to deepen our faith outside the walls of the church, regardless of age, would be considered a home practice. For children this might be a craft project that engages with a Bible story or a Sunday School lesson. For adults, this could be contemplative prayer or the daily office or Bible study.

We've seen this with our children in activities that were either dropped off, mailed, e-mailed, or picked up outside church. Many parishes have catchy seasonal names for this like Lent in a Bag or Advent in a Box. I'd hope that in a post-pandemic world we do everything we can to encourage the continuation of home practices.

We've certainly all realized that God doesn't dwell exclusively inside the church. We know this intellectually, of course, but the pandemic blew this whole notion apart for many of us as we learned in very tangible ways that we can — that we *must* — practice our faith at home as well as at church. When we regather, let's embrace home practices not out of sheer necessity but out of a desire to be disciples of Jesus. Building bridges between church and home through home practices is critical to embodying a 24/7 faith and not just a one-hour on Sunday faith.

Home practices are all about discipleship. Sunday morning worship remains the heart and soul of the worshiping community, but home practices form the daily walk with our Lord that we have all been called to experience and live out.

### **Reflect & Consider**

1. *What home practices are currently used by your congregation?*
2. *How many of these were developed since the start of the pandemic?*
3. *How will you embrace and expand upon such practices in the future?*

## **CHILDREN’S FORMATION**

Based on diocesan regathering guidelines, our in-person Sunday School classes will likely be the last thing to happen. One of the major questions for a parish that holds children’s ministry as one of its main identities, is what will this look like?

What lessons can we learn from secular educators that might inform our approach to Christian formation moving forward? All-day remote school leaves both students and teachers drained but what about short, online sessions like our Children’s Chapel or the occasional Zoom Sunday School? Do we incorporate these into our program in some manner even when we’re back to in-person Sunday School?

I’ve often thought that we could use technology in our Sunday School classes in creative ways — not replacing our amazing volunteer teachers, of course, but by supplementing their lessons with online content. The only way this could happen effectively would be to invest in what I’d call Smart Sunday Classrooms — spaces with smart screens. This would open up a whole new world and allow some of this content to be shared with parents before or after the lessons.

Again, this would be supplemental material to capture the imagination of children, used judiciously (they’re on screens enough as it is!), not a replacement for relationships with teachers and fellow students.

### **Reflect & Consider**

1. *What did children’s formation look like during this time?*
2. *What resonated and what did not for your children and families?*
3. *What lessons will you take from this time and how will you incorporate this into the post-pandemic church?*

## **YOUTH MINISTRY**

The good news with online youth ministry is that they’re all great with technology. The bad news is that they already spend much of their time online and the fatigue is real. While it’s generally true that online ministry is much harder than in-person ministry, this seems magnified with youth ministry. Youth leaders not only have to be creative and quick-on-their feet, they also have to be technology experts to keep youth engaged.

At my own parish, we’re fortunate to have an Associate Rector who is both talented and passionate. She has held weekly Zoom sessions with our middle schoolers in addition to bi-weekly sessions with high schoolers and confirmation class. But this is not without much emotional cost.

Based on diocesan guidance and the recognition that developmentally speaking youth, in particular, need in-person connection, we have held a number of socially-distanced, outdoor Pop-Up youth ministry events. These tend to be more focused on community building than formation, though they always end with prayer.

### **Reflect & Consider**

1. *How have youth been engaged in online ministry?*
2. *Looking ahead, what lessons have you learned that may translate?*
3. *What has resonated for the youth and are there pieces of online church and/or ministry they would like to continue?*

### **PASTORAL CARE**

One of the lessons we've learned is that crowd-sourced parishioner-to-parishioner pastoral care is incredibly effective. Clergy will always be on call for crisis care, of course, but so much of the day-to-day connections are made by members of the community simply reaching out to one another. I would hope this model would continue post-pandemic. From tech support to postcards to phone calls to vaccine appointment help, this has been a joy to behold.

### **Reflect & Consider**

1. *How did pastoral care function during the pandemic?*
2. *In what ways did your congregation take care of one another?*
3. *Will any of the new models continue?*

### **POTENTIAL PUSHBACK**

Presenting a plan to the parish about what a post-pandemic church will look like that involves some radical rethinking, will inevitably lead to pushback. Some of this will be rooted in grief at what we are giving up as both a society and a church. But it's important to stress that we're doing this to not just survive as a church, but to thrive as a parish spiritually, programmatically, numerically, and financially.

Innovative ideas and rethinking traditional models of church are often (always?) met with skepticism from longtime parishioners who cling to traditional notions of what church should look and feel like. You can write position papers and use charts and speak rationally, but people's response to things ecclesiastical is first and foremost emotional (just try moving furniture around the sanctuary). True leadership will be to pastorally acknowledge the grief and fear that derives from change, but move forward with purpose and clarity. All while reminding people that ultimately we're not changing the essentials of the faith community — just the way that it is consumed and experienced.

Still, it's always important to think through the likely complaints and address them preemptively. "Why are you paying attention to people who physically aren't even here? I don't want to see people using phones in church — this is where I come to *get away* from technology. I don't want to be seen on camera during a church service." What others would you add here?

### **Reflect & Consider**

1. *As you seek to reimagine the church in light of this time of upheaval and opportunity, where do you think you may encounter pushback in your congregation?*
2. *What are the particular pinch points that will be tricky to navigate?*

## **(SOME OF THE) OPEN QUESTIONS**

- With online liturgy, people have gotten used to spending less time at Sunday morning worship. What used to be a two and a half hour commitment (drive to church, park, worship, coffee hour, drive home) is more like 40 minutes. Will people be looking for something shorter? Or will the joy of being together again transcend this?
- How will church be different when we begin to regather? Are there some traditions that simply can't/shouldn't happen anymore? ie. passing collection plates, touching at the Peace, food at coffee hour, the common cup at communion, congregational singing.
- Are there ministries that need to be let go of in this new environment?
- Is there a strategy for all-ages home practices that support a more decentralized approach to faith?
- Who might be invited into a digital ministry task force as the parish examines possibilities for moving forward in new ways?
- Is there any grant money available to pursue some of these new ideas? If so, how would it best be allocated?
- What about people for whom online church doesn't feel worshipful or who simply aren't online? How will they be impacted by changes?

### **Reflect & Consider**

1. *What would you add to this list of open questions?*

## **FINANCIAL GIVING**

According to *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, 41% of religious congregations reported a decrease in giving during the pandemic, while 28% of congregations (predominantly larger ones) saw increases. Congregations that already offered online giving options fared better.

How is your parish's online giving process? Our is not ideal. It's clunky and not user-friendly. As we think about the potential health hazards of passing collection plates, this may be a practice we jettison. People could certainly place envelopes, check, or cash into a box in the entryway to be processed up with the bread and wine at the offertory as signs of what we give to God.

But it's also true that fewer and fewer people carry cash these days. This was always the case generationally but many who used to pay in cash for items on a regular basis got away from this during the pandemic. There's absolutely no reason people shouldn't be able to Venmo money to the church with their smartphones during the offertory on Sunday morning. It also may be more welcoming to newcomers and visitors to NOT pass a collection plate in front of them.

Interestingly, the survey referenced above indicated that not a single congregation expected to increase their budget this year, while 48% anticipated reductions.

### **Reflect & Consider**

1. *How has the pandemic impacted your parish's financial position in general, and giving in particular?*

2. *Did you make changes to how people can give financially? How might you incorporate giving strategies in the months and years ahead?*

### **(SOME OF THE) PANDEMIC CHURCH LESSONS LEARNED**

- The church is more than just a building, it's ultimately the people.
- And yet (see above), we tremendously value our sacred space and its importance in our lives has been reaffirmed.
- We can do anything for a season, even if that season is very, very long.
- People participating remotely count just as much as those worshiping in person.
- Sunday morning is important for the worshiping community, but is less important than ever before to a parish community.
- Discipleship (following Jesus) is no longer rooted to a particular time and place.
- Intergenerational home faith practices for children and adults are critical components of a vibrant faith.
- Connecting people to God and one another is just as important as gathering in person.
- Gathering together for worship remains a key piece of our Christian identity — this just doesn't always happen in traditional, building-bound ways.
- We (clergy especially) need to let go of traditional metrics for measuring church vitality aka Average Sunday Attendance and seek others ways of gauging healthy ministry.
- An interactive component to worship is a helpful and life-giving way to build community.
- Online worship is less about production values and more about creating authentic connection and building community.
- Lay-led, crowd-sourced pastoral care is a powerful component of parish life, one that embodies loving our neighbors as ourselves.
- Clergy can't (and shouldn't) shoulder the online/in-person burden alone — it's not sustainable.
- We crave the sacraments, which have become even more meaningful than ever since we lost them for so long.

### **Reflect & Consider**

1. *Of the above lessons learned, which particularly resonate in your context?*
2. *Are there other lessons you would add to this list?*

### **CONCLUSION**

My hope in taking some time to reflect more deeply on a post-pandemic church is that we will see the opportunity before us. This isn't just about technical fixes (like getting better WiFi), but embracing bold, substantive, adaptive change to insure our future as a parish. This is not easy work and there will be bumps along this road. Frankly, parish ministry is always a balance between inward and outward facing approaches to the Christian life, between feeding and taking care of those in our midst and reaching out to share this good news of the Gospel with those beyond our walls; between prayerful contemplation and decisive action.

We've seen that life is fragile, that living with uncertainty is hard, that inequality is real, and that relationships are critical. We can encourage more interconnection in ways that transcend the

traditional forms through a willingness to love our neighbors who don't look like us or act like us or live near us.

I do believe that the past year has helped us tap into what really matters in this life — relationships, love, faith, selflessness, art, music, meaning. Perhaps the church will be able to speak into these aspects of our humanity — and share them — in more profound ways than ever before.