

## Some Congregations Are 'Zoomed Out' on Virtual Worship

*The Wired Word for the Week of January 3, 2021*

### **In the News**

"We are now Zoomed out."

That's how the Rev. Jerry Smith, rector of Holy Comforter Episcopal Church in Tallahassee, Florida, explained his congregation's feelings about virtual worship conducted online using the cloud platform for video and audio conferencing known as Zoom or using similar applications.

That feeling was behind Smith's church's decision to hold their recent Christmas Eve service in the church's parking lot as a drive-in service with the liturgy transmitted via FM radio instead of only streaming it online or holding it indoors with strict limits on how many could attend.

While gathering in their cars is not the same as gathering in pews, it's better than settling for a streaming service, Smith said. "We don't want to sit in front of the TV screen anymore. It's not the same as being in each other's presence," he said.

Throughout the pandemic, Holy Comforter has followed the guidance of the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, strictly limiting attendance at indoor services, but that has meant that not everyone connected to that congregation has the opportunity to see other congregants face to face.

While many churches have adopted virtual worship and other means to maintain social distance during these infectious times, none of those fully compensate for Christian worship as an in-person, side-by-side experience.

But does that matter to the average worshiper? According to a Pew Research Center survey conducted in mid-July, nine out of 10 Americans who have watched services online or on TV in the past month said they are either "very" satisfied (54 percent) or "somewhat" satisfied (37 percent) with the experience. Only 8 percent said they were "not too" or "not at all" satisfied with worship in those formats.

Of course, that survey was conducted while livestreaming local church worship was still a relatively new thing, and as Smith indicated, by now, some people are "Zoomed out." Thus, if the Pew survey were conducted today, the results may have been different, though we can only guess whether fewer or more people would favor virtual worship.

Still, many church leaders are concerned about the long-term effects of relying on online services. Will people return when restrictions are lifted? Or will they prefer to take part online?

Whatever the answers to those questions, the major concern is not about whether churches will retain enough in-person parishioners to keep their doors open, but that, as the Rev. Laura Everett, executive director of the Massachusetts Council of Churches, put it, Christianity is not just a set of ideas, but also a set of practices and relationships, many of which have been muted or changed by the pandemic.

Everett said that the past nine months have been the longest she has been absent from a church since she had a conversion experience as an eighth-grader. And others who have been regular attenders can no doubt say something similar.

Everett said she misses the chaos and the mess of worship services but particularly the common, small acts of grace that come from in-person connection: putting her hand on someone, for instance, who has been sick, and praying for their healing.

"I have missed that echo of voices when we say the Lord's Prayer, those well-worn words where my voice will drop out sometimes because I am so tired or so sad and other people carry the prayer for me," she said.

"I know that can happen on Zoom and it does. But I miss sitting next to them," she adds.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Why Christianity Remains an In-Person Religion, Even in a Pandemic. Religion News Service](#)  
[Will the Coronavirus Permanently Convert In-Person Worshipers to Online Streamers? They Don't Think So. Pew Research Center](#)

### **Applying the News Story**

While we at *The Wired Word* believe that in-person worship is generally the best arrangement, nothing said in this lesson is to minimize the power and effectiveness of online, on-air or other forms of worship that maintain social distance. And we commend the pastors and congregations that have tried new ways to conduct worship throughout this pandemic. We also expect that once the bans on gathering are no longer needed, some of the new worship platforms will continue as worthwhile supplements to in-person worship.

We also recognize certain strengths in social-distance types of worship. In fact, some people have found that online worship shows them that we are "members one of another" across a much greater distance and a bigger "body" than we may have previously recognized. For instance, one TWW team member tells us, "I have been worshiping with a church in Maryland, though my local congregation is several states away. I also do Bible study and some other activities with the Maryland church because they offer opportunities my local church does not. So I have recognized and experienced the gifts of those far-flung members of Christ's church as well, and they and I have become connected in ways that would not have happened if church participation were only in person."

But there is much to commend in-person worship, and that is our subject in this lesson.

## **The Big Questions**

1. Now that you have experienced online worship (or some other social-distance kind of worship), are you more or less likely to return to in-person worship once the pandemic is over? Why?
2. To what degree is living a Christian life an individual endeavor? To what degree is it a congregational endeavor? Do you agree that Christianity is not just a set of ideas, but also a set of practices and relationships? Why or why not?
3. What specific things do you receive from the in-person fellowship of your congregation? Which of these has been in short supply since the social-distancing restrictions have limited church gatherings?
4. "Passing the peace" is a common practice in many churches where, at a specified point in the worship service, congregants leave their seats and intermingle, shaking hands or hugging and greeting one another in the name of Christ or saying "Peace be with you" or something similar. Given the amount of physical contact and lack of social distancing involved, do you think passing the peace should be permanently eliminated from worship services once the pandemic is over? Why or why not?
5. When online worship is the only option available, what can you do by way of preparation at home to receive the most from the service?

## **Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope**

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

### **Hebrews 10:24-25**

*And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.* (For context, read 10:19-25.)

These two verses are the closest biblical reference we have to a command to attend Christian worship with others. Notice that the writer of Hebrews says that one reason for doing so is to encourage one another. And he was right. Church isn't like school where you attend for a while until you receive your "B.A. Christian" degree and then you graduate. The church has no alumni association.

TWW team member Frank Ramirez says that this scripture passage reminds him of something that happened when he was young: "Once we started to go to public school, we attended midweek catechism class. When Dad picked us up he would ask, 'Did you get saved or do you have to go back next week?' Since my father was committed to lifelong attendance and discipleship, I'm sure this was his way of saying church is a lifelong vocation.

We need to continue to be part of a faith community both for what we receive and for what we contribute.

**Questions:** What do you receive from others during in-person worship? What do they receive from you? (We are not talking about virus spread here!) When talking with other members of your congregation during these pandemic days, do you ever wish you could tear your mask off and give them a hug? What is that telling you?

What or who provokes you to good works without the supportive and challenging fellowship of in-person worship and study?

### **Galatians 6:2**

*Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. (No context needed.)*

Bearing one another's burdens fulfills the law of Christ? Which law of Christ? We suspect this is a reference to Jesus' endorsement of the command to "Love your neighbor as yourself."

One TWW team member tells that during the pandemic, his church's deacons have divided up the church membership in order to minister through cards, phone calls and other forms of support. These deacons then switch their groups around so those folks don't get cards from just one person or couple.

**Questions:** How does face-to-face contact help you to perceive burdens others are carrying, burdens they may not be otherwise communicating about? How does in-person worship help you share your burdens?

Do you agree that one way to "bear one another's burdens" *is* to continue online worship, even when we'd prefer to be in person, in order to protect one another from the virus?

In what way are burdens being borne in your fellowship in the absence of physical presence?

### **Romans 12:4-8**

*For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness. (For context, read 12:1-21.)*

Here Paul speaks about the distribution of spiritual gifts among the members of a congregation. While we certainly cannot say that such gifts cannot be used to aid other members when we can only meet virtually, it seems obvious that they come into play best when we are meeting together in person -- "members one of another" as Paul puts it.

**Questions:** When has another member's spiritual gift been a help to you? What role, if any, did face-to-face meeting have in receiving that help? What part of ministry is unchanged despite lack of physical presence?

### **Matthew 18:19-20**

*Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them. (No context needed.)*

These words are from Jesus, and, of course, were spoken in an age when almost no technology existed to allow for worship of God in any form except physical gathering. There's no reason to think that Jesus is not present today among a congregation gathered in his name online by Zoom or some other technology.

Still, technology can't sub for the power of a hug or a baby crying two pews away or the sense of anticipation with which a congregation may physically gather.

**Questions:** What do you miss most because of not being able to have in-person worship? Why?

### **For Further Discussion**

1. Have individuals in your fellowship contracted Covid-19 from contact within your congregation, sickened, or even died? Were they attending your services or going to another's service because yours were closed? How has this affected your feelings about in-person worship?
2. Respond to this, from Ernest Campbell, former pastor of Riverside Church in New York City. "From the very beginning of the human enterprise, religious longings have required institutional form. We need each other: the uplifting of a shared liturgy, a shared fellowship, a shared service. However personal our faith may be, it cannot possibly be private and survive. Let it be remembered that Jesus was not a spiritual Lone Ranger going off on his own. He was a product of the Old Testament church and one who heralded the dawn of the New Testament church. The local church, faults and all, is the central entity of the Christian enterprise."
3. What aspects of our spiritual growth, including satisfying the hunger for righteousness, are related to regular church attendance? Can there be a negative impact from regular church attendance? For example, instead of a hunger for righteousness, do we risk developing self-righteousness because we regularly attend? If so, how can we avoid that?
4. Discuss this, from the book *Christian Doctrine*, by Shirley C. Guthrie Jr.: "(T)o be a Christian means inevitably to belong to the church. To believe in and follow Christ is to join in the community he draws together around himself. .... Whoever tries to do without the church, tries to do without Christ."

In what ways can you be part of the church when you can't be there in person?

### **Responding to the News**

Make sure to continue praying for the members of your congregation, even if you cannot gather and don't know of specific needs. We all stand in need of prayer.

You might help your church leaders consider, after the pandemic ends, including an online option for attending services (much like schools have done) where some congregants would be able to "log in" to services if they can't physically attend. Some churches may already be doing this, but it could be an option at more churches post-pandemic with our experience with virtual services during the pandemic.

### **Prayer**

O Lord, be with the congregations that are currently unable to gather, that they may still receive the ministry of your Spirit, and of one another, in any ways that are possible right now. In Jesus' name. Amen.