BEHIND THE SCREEN: WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT ONLINE CHURCH?

WHAT IS CHURCH?

The word "church" is often used to refer to the physical building where people gather to worship. People say things like, "I went to church this morning" or "Our bible study group meets at the church." Although, there's nowhere in the bible where the word "church" designates a physical building.

The biblical word for church, "ekklesia" refers to an assembly of believers gathered together in some public place. The emphasis is on those who gather together - the assembly of believers - who anywhere, are united into one body. We see this in Acts 9:31 where we find the word "church" used to describe the sum of all believers over a vast geographical area. Some today refer to this concept as the "big C" church or the universal church. The bible also uses several metaphors to further describe this gathering of believers as the church. These include referring to the church as "the people of God," "the family of God," "the bride of Christ," and "the body of Christ."

The rising use of video streaming for online worship services has sparked a debate on whether we should count those who participate online as part of the gathering that we know as the church. This discussion has gone beyond just Christian circles and into secular media outlets. Despite this debate, the use of online video in churches is continuing to rise.

Life Church in Oklahoma City introduced an "internet campus" in 2006, so we've been adjusting to this new form of church now for over a decade. Many more churches have followed suit and launched an online church campus in the last several years. Nearly half (47%) of churches are reporting that they now have online campuses. This is up 28% from our report five years ago, where 62% of those surveyed indicated they "did not plan" to launch one. Many churches have even hired online campus pastors to minister to those who participate in their church online.

The focus of this report is not to debate or resolve the discussion of how to classify online church. Rather the goal is to share research findings from a recent *Leadership Network* survey to show why and how churches of various sizes are communicating through online channels.

INSIGHTS FROM THE INNOVATORS

In addition to the quantitative research, we wanted to see what we could learn from some of the leading innovators and practitioners in their fields when it came to online church and the digital space. Interviews were conducted with the following church leaders to learn more about how their churches are leveraging online church to advance their mission and to help accomplish the Great Commission.

- **RYAN SCOTT,** McClellanville and Online Campus Pastor, Seacoast Church (Mt. Pleasant, SC), www.seacoast.org
- **DAN HICKLING,** Online Campus Pastor, Calvary Church (Fort Lauderdale, FL), www.calvaryftl.org
- **MATT WELTY,** Director of Information Technology, Crossroads Church (Cincinnati, OH), www.crossroads.net
- **NATHAN MCLEAN,** Online Campus Pastor, Hillsong Church (Australia), http://hillsong.com/australia/

Throughout this report, you will see a series of sidebar interviews that contain these leader's insights.

WHAT DO CHURCHES DO ONLINE?

The churches in the survey were given ten options to choose from in terms of what they do online with their weekly services, and they were asked to select all the options that applied to their situation. The chart below shows the most used online methods for each of the church size categories included in this study.

	800-1,999	2,000-4,999	5,000-9,999	10,000+	2018 AVG
On-demand video of service available anytime	32%	47%	59%	55%	48%
Live stream worship service on church's website	21%	38%	53%	52%	41%
Live stream worship on Facebook Live	10%	16%	22%	25%	18%
Have online team to take prayer requests and respond to viewers	9%	20%	26%	41%	24%
Have an online campus pastor (paid or volunteer)	3%	10%	18%	28%	15%
Have online small groups	3%	4%	6%	19%	8%
Minimal online beyond audio (podcast) of the message	17%	15%	12%	10%	14%

The most **common method used** regardless of the size of the church was to "offer **on demand videos** of our teaching that can be watched anytime." But the prevalence of this method decreased along with the size of the church.

The **second most common** online tool used was to "**live stream** the entire worship experience on the church's website." More than half of the churches with over 5,000 in attendance used this method while only 21 percent of churches under 2,000 in attendance did so.

The **third most common** method used by the megachurches (those with an attendance of more than 2,000) studied was to have "an **online team** to handle prayer requests and internet-generated dialog." Although churches with an attendance of over 10,000 were twice as likely to do so as churches with an attendance of 2,000-4,999 (41 percent to 20 percent respectively). This is often seen as a way to increase engagement from and with attendees.

A **fourth common** methodology is use of an "**online campus pastor**" who is either paid or volunteer to interact with online attendees. This is utilized as another way to extend engagement. Twenty-eight percent of churches with an attendance over 10,000 reported having an online campus pastor. Eighteen percent of churches with an attendance of 5,000-9,999 had an online campus pastor. While 10 percent of churches in the 2,000-4,999 size range had an online campus pastor and only 3 percent of the churches with an attendance of 800-1,999 used an online campus pastor.

WHAT DO YOU DO ONLINE WITH WORSHIP SERVICES? (LIVE STREAM? ON DEMAND?)

Scott: *We are currently broadcasting three of our services in real time online on the weekends which includes both Saturday and Sunday. We have our SimLive which is a re-broadcast from our pre-service music to the closing announcements. We have a team of volunteers who interact with online attendees for both the live broadcasts and the rebroadcast service. We also have one Facebook live service on Sundays that's also available on demand from our Facebook page later in the week. Our website also has all our Sunday messages available online in an archive that can be watched any time.*

Hickling: *We've been doing online ministry for ten years now and have used different platforms along the way. Today, we stream five services live each week and have various replays of the service also. We have a tool that lets people log in to communicate and chat during a live service and typically we have about 50-60 people per service in our chat room. We follow the same pattern for each service. We meet and greet online participants before the live service starts. During worship, people will post inspirational verses, thoughts and emojis to express themselves which creates a unifying dynamic. Our online hosts will greet guests, invite them into our safe chat room environment to interact in real time. People will post scriptures during the Bible message and even post thoughts during the message. We try to replicate the invitation online to present the gospel and give people an opportunity to respond and have someone pray with them. After the service, people can stay online for intercessory prayer. Online attendees can post a prayer request and one of our volunteer hosts will type a prayer for that person.*

Welty: *Our online church service includes the same teaching recorded and edited from our Saturday night service combines with streamed worship, announcements, a tailored welcome and closing designed just for online. We also have simulated live services that are available on demand so people can hit the play button and have church.*

McLean: *We broadcast our morning and evening services on Facebook and YouTube. Before service, we interact with people.*

DO YOU HAVE AN ONLINE CAMPUS PASTOR? TEAM?

Scott: *I am the pastor for our online campus and one of our physical campuses. We have one other staff member who works with me plus a team of 20 volunteers who help host our services and who pray and chat with online worshippers. We also have a translation team of 30 people interpreting our services and we will cross train these folks to be live hosts as well. So, our "dream team" has a total of 50 people currently.*

Hickling: *Seventy percent of our online volunteers aren't local to Fort Lauderdale where our church is. I've learned that the people in the wilderness are the hungriest to help. I see our volunteer development taking place over a three-year period. In the first year, we focus on relationships and I try to build trust and get to know them. The second year is about discipleship as we try to go deeper based on the trust we've established. The third year is about ownership as we give them opportunities to serve in the ministry.*

Multisite churches were more than four times as likely to have an online campus pastor as single site churches (14 percent compared to 3 percent respectively). Multisite churches were almost twice as likely to have an online team in place to handle prayer requests and to generate dialog with online viewers (22 percent compared to 12 percent respectively).

Nineteen percent of the churches with an attendance over 10,000 reported using a **fifth method - online small groups.** While still a minor percentage overall, multisite churches were twice as likely to offer online small groups as single site churches (6 percent compared to 3 percent respectively). But less than 5 percent of the other churches in the study had online small groups available.

Other online methodologies

According to the data, one of the common logistical concerns for online church is how to handle **communion and baptisms.** Only 3 percent of the churches overall offered either online communion or online baptisms. However, anecdotally, many online campus pastors see this as a great opportunity for those that either prefer online or are unable to attend a physical campus.

WHAT ARE YOU DOING IN THE DIGITAL SPACE BEYOND YOUR ONLINE CAMPUS?

Scott: *We also have a strong social media presence on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter that includes regular notifications, announcements, snippets of sermons. We do all this to try to be present where people are. We're trying to create some online small group Bible studies to reach people out of state or who live far away. We believe that doing some community online is better than no community for people.*

Hickling: *One thing I've been trying is to "chain mail" our online attendees with content suited to their interests through a virtual church bulletin. I also share more about myself, what I'm reading, etc., to create another communication piece for our online folks. Both are designed to create more engagement.*

Welty: *We have a smartphone app that we created called Crossroads Anywhere. The purpose is to help people grow with God and each other. We've tried to use tech to teach spiritual disciplines. It also helps people connect to the church and other people through sharing prayer requests, online journals, podcasts, articles, event sign-ups and more. We've developed content personalization on our website for our articles, podcasts, and videos that are felt need directed.*

McLean: *There are so many things going on! Podcasts are a big part of this including podcasts from our pastors around the world. We have streamed our Hillsong conferences online and are still exploring the best way to expand the digital reach without losing the value of being onsite. We have created digital solutions for churches globally and have created an adaptable conference app for smartphones.*

Another oft repeated issue for online churches is what to do with children. Less than one percent of the churches that participated in this survey offered any kind of online children's ministry. Given that the use of online church for adults has grown in the last several years, it will be interesting to see if online children's ministry will become an additional component offered by more churches seeking to evangelize and disciple children online.

WHAT ARE YOU DOING ONLINE FOR THE NEXT GENERATION (CHILDREN'S AND STUDENT'S MINISTRY)?

Hickling: *We have to be careful about this because we don't engage with minors online for safety reasons. When we find out an online attendee is under 18, then there are layers of protection to observe and we encourage them to include their parents. We support parents through prayer, encouragement and counsel. We don't have anything structured for children's and student ministry online.*

McLean: *We're going to launch something for this soon. We envision a whole range of curriculum for children including midweek videos. These projects are in the pipeline now and we want to do something.*

HOW DOES ONLINE ATTENDANCE COMPARE TO OFFLINE (IN-PERSON) ATTENDANCE?

More than two-thirds (68 percent) of the churches in this study overall said that their online attendance was less than the in-person attendance. Two percent of the churches said online and in-person attendance were equal. Only 4 percent of the churches claimed that their online attendance was more than the in-person attendance. Eighteen percent of the churches overall said they don't measure online attendance well enough to know how it compares to the in-person attendance.

HOW DO YOU TRACK/COUNT YOUR ONLINE WORSHIP ATTENDANCE? AND HOW DOES ONLINE WORSHIP ATTENDANCE COMPARE TO YOUR LIVE/ONSITE SERVICES?

Scott: *We get a report each week from our streaming provider that provides a list of the individual IP addresses that viewed our services. Our average watch time is 25-26 minutes for our live broadcast services. The average view time for our SimLive service 5-6 minutes and the average Facebook viewer watches for about 20-30 seconds. We have about 3000-5000 in our weekly online attendance.*

Hickling: *Our online worshippers account for about 20 percent of our physical attendees. We have 4000-5000 people online each week and 16,000 people on our various campuses.*

Welty: *Comparing onsite attendance with online is really apples and oranges. They're both fruit but different. We count an attendee as someone who views online for at least 30 minutes. It's a very imperfect model and we may change it in the future. But if you can't count it, then you can't grow it. You have to value the engagement no matter what it is, so you can grow it. On a given week, half of our attendance is online and half is onsite.*

McLean: *We track everything and try to measure it so we can grow it like anything else—start with one and go from there. We track our Facebook community and the number of interactions and comments. We also count the number of people who are online ten minutes into the preaching and those who are still online with fifteen minutes of preaching left. We've found these to be similar numbers. We don't track anyone who just clicks on the link in our total viewers. We track decisions for Christ and ask people to use the hand emoji in the comments to indicate they've made a decision. We follow-up to get more details and to share Bible reading plans with them. We track prayer requests and praises through our online form and have a team who follows up personally on all requests. And financial giving is tracked. We have a small number who are giving but some are tithing like they would if they attended onsite.*
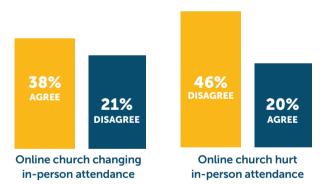
HOW DOES ONLINE ATTENDANCE TRANSLATE INTO ATTENDANCE AT THE PHYSICAL CHURCH CAMPUS?

Based on the survey responses, the church leaders in all four size categories noted that this was one of the top three most important measures associated with online church that they talk about as a team.

Thirty-eight percent of the church leaders surveyed said they either "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that "online church is changing people's in-person attendance habits." By comparison, 21 percent of the leaders studied said they "strongly disagreed" or "disagreed" that online church is changing in-person attendance patterns.

Overall, 46 percent of church leaders said they "strongly disagreed" or "disagreed" that "online church hurts attendance at our physical church." Only 20 percent said they "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that online church hurt in-person attendance.

38% AGREE **21% DISAGREE**

Online church changing in-person attendance

46% DISAGREE **20% AGREE**

Online church hurt in-person attendance

DOES PROVIDING AN ONLINE SERVICE TRANSLATE INTO OVERALL ATTENDANCE GROWTH?

According to survey respondents, it's a mixed bag. **Thirty-five percent said they "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that online services helped with attendance growth.** But 26 percent said they "strongly disagreed" or "disagreed" that online service prompted attendance growth. And 27 percent said that online services had no impact on attendance growth.

WHAT'S THE MOST IMPORTANT FEATURE OF ONLINE CHURCH?

Survey participants were asked to identify the single most important feature of online church that their church leaders talk about the most. Listed below in the chart are the priorities for each of the four categories of churches based on attendance.

Larger churches over 5,000 in attendance placed a higher value on reaching an international audience from different countries or locations. Just like church leaders tend to be concerned about "butts in seats" at the physical church campus, they're equally concerned about "eyeballs on screens" and want to know how many people are watching the worship services online. Online attendance was the top priority overall according to 24 percent of the church leaders who responded to survey.

WHO IS ATTENDING YOUR SERVICES ONLINE? WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF YOUR ONLINE ATTENDEES?

Scott: *Our largest demographic or about half of our online worshippers are women over the age of 50. We hope to adjust our reach in time. More women watch on Facebook and men are more likely to watch on YouTube.*

Hickling: *Seventy percent of our online folks are Floridians or people living in the southeast U.S. The other 30 percent are people from all over the world. We have a strong South American contingency and one of our volunteers lives in Russia. In our chat rooms during services, 70 percent of the people are women that we interact with there.*

Welty: *Most of our online attendees are local. People are attending church more frequently now because of online since now they can't opt to stream the service when they would have missed church in the past. We've done some surveys of our online folks. The online attendees tend to skew a little younger than our onsite attendees. Our normal, engaged member will attend onsite and online given the week.*

McLean: *We know our top three countries for online viewers are the U.S., Australia, and the United Kingdom. Our biggest demographic on Facebook is an older group of women based on those who are commenting.*

	800-1,999	2,000-4,999	5,000-9,999	10,000+	% of Top Concern
How online brings new people to physical campus	21%	17%	17%	16%	18%
Different countries or locations being reached	12%	11%	17%	29%	17%
How many are online	20%	29%	24%	23%	24%
Online giving	20%	14%	12%	9%	14%

Other priority features of online church were a strategy to bring new people to a physical campus and online giving potential.

DOES YOUR STRATEGY SEEK TO MOVE PEOPLE FROM ONLINE TO A PHYSICAL CAMPUS OR SOME OTHER COMMON LOCATION? IF SO, HOW DO YOU TRACK THIS AND/OR PROMOTE THIS?

Scott: *We've taken a "both/and" approach. Half of our marketing targets a geographic region with the goal to give people exposure to our services online with the intent to help move them to attend one of our 14 campuses nearest to them. The other half of our marketing efforts are focused on anyone in South Carolina or the U.S. We used to focus more globally, but now we only advertise globally in locations where we have strategic international partners who can help connect an online attendee to a local church in that country or region.*

Hickling: *Yes, our strategy tries to move them, but we want to make sure there's a bridge that can support some weight. Once we've established some trust, then we'll ask them about worshipping onsite. We do this through one-on-one conversations online because we don't want to sacrifice our relationship for an agenda. We want to be sure they know they're unconditionally loved and accepted, and we want to help them see there's a church they can connect with and grow in. If they're local, then we try to get them to one of our campuses.*

Welty: *This is a matter of semantics because we don't want to convert someone from online to onsite. Our goal is to make sure they're connected to the church community. Connecting is more important than converting them from online to onsite for us. But we do work to try to funnel online viewers to a local campus or at least to make sure they know there's a local community they can engage with and we try to introduce them to that community.*

McLean: *We prefer they would go to a physical church location. In our chat rooms and Facebook page, we ask people where they are from and we try to connect them to a local church. We ask online attendees the following questions: Are you part of a local church already? If so, which one? What do you hope to get out of this online church?*

WHAT'S THE MOST IMPORTANT FEATURE OF ONLINE CHURCH?

Scott: *For us the most important feature is to do things to encourage and facilitate interaction with our online attendees.*

Hickling: *We believe there are two equally important components. The first is the "content" which is 51 percent of the equation and represents the online church experience. The content is like a bonfire for everyone to gather around, then when they gather, we can go deeper with them. The second is "community" which accounts for the other 49 percent. This is the piece that focuses on people gathering, contributing, being known alongside the content. This is about discipleship and relationships. We want our online worshippers to feel like they're part of the life of the church.*

Welty: *We've tried to fold in the digital to the whole experience. Our online church broadcast has a dedicated person in charge of it caring for people who engage in our church that way. We believe they're attending church and we have plans for them just like someone who comes to a campus.*

McLean: *Need to differentiate between streaming worship services versus having an online campus. The ability to stream the services is the most important because you need the content. But in an online campus, people will participate in the service and pastoral care, community and engagement are built in.*

WHY DO YOU OFFER ONLINE CHURCH?

The church leaders surveyed were asked to identify the most important reason their church offered an online campus. Five options were available to choose from in the question. The **predominant reason for online church was to "keep our church family connected for those working, traveling or sick"** (46 percent overall). Churches with an attendance of less than 5,000 were twice as likely to say their purpose for online church was to keep members connected when away than churches over 10,000 in attendance (56 percent compared to 27 percent respectively).

Overall, 81 percent of the church leaders surveyed said they "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that "online services help their people stay connected to the church."

The **second most important reason for online church was for "evangelism/outreach"** with a response rate of 26 percent. Over half of the churches in the study (56 percent) said they "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that "online services helped evangelize people we would not otherwise have reached." Even though many churches have made an intentional push to be more focused on discipleship in the last several years, only 5 percent of the churches surveyed noted that discipleship was the most important reason to offer online church. But 41 percent of the church leaders said they "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that "their online services help disciple their own congregation." And almost half of the respondents (47 percent) said they "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that "online services help disciple people not connected to any physical church."

Therefore, online church is seen as a much better "front door" or "side door" to bring new people into the church as opposed to a strategy to disciple and retain believers. Eighty percent of the survey respondents said they either "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that "online church helps people check out the church before visiting a physical campus."

	Evangelism/ Outreach	Discipleship	Keep Church Connected	Multisite Strategy	Increase Revenue Stream
10,000+	34%	6%	27%	20%	0%
5,000-9,999	30%	6%	44%	15%	0%
2,000-4,999	20%	4%	54%	13%	2%
800-1,999	20%	3%	58%	7%	3%

WHAT DRIVES YOUR VISION AND COMMITMENT TO ONLINE/DIGITAL CHURCH?

Scott: *Online is just another tool or avenue to reach people. In 2017, Greg Surratt said, "More and more people are looking to connect the church on their own terms." Part of our vision is to be available as people are looking for us and to reach people groups that are not easily reached like people with a physical disability or social anxiety who might have a hard time coming to church.*

Hickling: *What drives us is the love of Christ that compels us to try to reproduce the church experience the best we can online for those who can't attend. It's also our God-given passion to make disciples that reinforces our online vision.*

Welty: *Our biggest driver is we want to reach as many people as possible and to reach our community we know it requires technology. We're not the right church for everybody, but we do reach certain types of people. We wanted to reach beyond driving distance to one of our campuses so online church was a must have for us to accomplish our mission as a church.*

LOYAL FOLLOWERS OR SPORADIC SURFERS?

Church leaders were asked to estimate whether online attendees watched a church's worship services irregularly or weekly on a scale from 1 to 5. In-person church attendance has become less frequent in the

HOW ENGAGED WOULD YOU SAY ARE THOSE THAT ATTEND AN ONLINE CAMPUS?

Scott: *We're getting better at our tracking. We've found that about half of our online population is existing members from a physical campus who couldn't attend onsite for some reason that week. So far, less than 10 percent of our online participants use the chat feature during an online service to interact with someone in our chat room. By tracking the IP addresses, we've discovered that about 5-10 percent of our online worshippers attend online regularly, and 30-40 percent are new people checking it out.*

Welty: *This is tricky because we don't require people to log in to watch online so we don't know exactly who is watching.*

last five plus years. Likewise, church leaders guessed that online attendance was similarly spotty. Overall, **40 percent said that they guessed online viewers were irregular online attendees of their church** (responded with a 1 or 2). By comparison, less than a fourth (24 percent) of the church leaders guessed that online viewers tuned in weekly (responded with a 4 or 5).

Over one-third (36 percent) answered with a 3 so they guessed it was a bit of a toss-up between irregular versus weekly online attendance.

WHAT'S THE BEST WAY TO CREATE COMMUNITY ONLINE?

Fostering a sense of community among online church attendees fits somewhat with the goal of keeping the church connected. Regardless of church size, the **three most used practices to leverage online efforts to create a sense of community were: Facebook (46 percent), chat rooms (18 percent) and email (16 percent).**

The smaller size churches (under 5,000 in attendance) were more likely to rely on Facebook than the larger churches (over 5,000 in attendance) (53 percent compared to 39 percent respectively). Likewise, the largest churches (over 10,000 in attendance) were three times as likely to use chat rooms compared to the smallest grouping of churches (800-1,999 in attendance) (28 percent compared to 9 percent respectively).

WHAT "NEXT STEPS" DO YOU HOPE OR EXPECT AN ONLINE ATTENDEE TO TAKE? (I.E., GET INVOLVED IN A SMALL GROUP? SERVE IN A MINISTRY? GIVE TO THE CHURCH? ETC.) HOW DOES THIS COMPARE WITH THE "NEXT STEPS" YOU HAVE FOR ONSITE ATTENDEES?

Scott: *: We want to replicate every aspect of our onsite service as much as possible online. For the first eight to nine years, we focused on "content distribution" and our goal was to get the content of the message out to people online. But in the last year and a half, our goal has been to replicate the full worship experience online.*

Hickling: *If it's a person who can't connect with a local Calvary campus, then we try to encourage them to start discipling people on their own where they live and to model a devotional lifestyle. For people who connect online, but could go to a local church, we try to get them to connect to a local church where they live and to help them have a local community to be part of. We encourage them to stay connected with us and some "double dip" by attending our services online and attending a local church.*

Welty: *We encourage people online to take physical next steps and have announcements and sections of our website designed to help them volunteer, join a group, or talk to an expert to navigate Crossroads. For people to take a step online, first they have to get on the grid by giving*

us their email or phone number so we can text them. Our Crossroads Anywhere team has the goal to connect people to community. We know that many of our online viewers are geographically close to one of our campuses, so we encourage people online to find the church community gathering and groups nearest them through our online search tool. We're intentional about letting people be anonymous but we make it easy for them to raise their hand. Our campuses so online church was a must have for us to accomplish our mission as a church.

McLean: *We're asking this question now as a church.*

IS ONLINE CHURCH A GOOD THING FOR THE CHRISTIAN MOVEMENT?

The survey asked church leaders to identify if the growth of online church has been a good thing for the Christian movement. Over half of those surveyed (59 percent) either "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that online church has been good for the Christian movement. The **larger the church the more positive the leaders were about online church.** For example, 41 percent of leaders from churches with an attendance over 10,000 "strongly agreed" that online church has been a positive compared to only 17 percent of leaders from the smallest category of churches (those with an attendance of 800-1,999). Only 6 percent of church leaders surveyed said they "didn't know" if online church was good for the Christian movement and 14 percent said they had "no opinion" about online church.

WHAT DO YOU THINK ARE THE PRIMARY OBJECTIONS SOME PASTORS AND CHURCHES HAVE ABOUT OFFERING ONLINE CHURCH? HAVE YOU FOUND THESE TO BE A REALITY IN YOUR SITUATION?

Welty: *One of the primary objections is whether it's good or bad for people to watch church online and consume church alone. We believe it's better to gather and experience the worship and teaching live. We want to make it as easy as possible for people to attend onsite, but we want to replicate our church experience online and help move people along the journey.*

McLean: *One objection is does online constitute church? Will it take people away from the physical church? We just started broadcasting our services live six months ago, so it's too soon for us to tell what the impact will be. Another concern is child safety related to online grooming that could happen. Our pastoral care team watches the comments vigilantly and will sometimes delete inappropriate comments.*

ADDITIONAL INNOVATOR INSIGHTS

WHAT IS YOUR VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF ONLINE/DIGITAL? WHAT ARE YOU WORKING ON NOW THAT YOU ARE NOT SURE WILL WORK?

Scott: Our online small groups are one thing we wonder if they will take off or not. We hope these groups can create meaningful connections. In the next 1-2 years, we hope to support home churches around the country who are meeting to watch our live services and we would like to create a video

broadcast of our children and student ministry services to have the complete home church package available for people.

Hickling: We're not sure. We know what we've done has been fruitful but we're not sure what the next step is for this ministry. From week to week, we try to love people well. I'd love to see us take some strategic trips to visit key volunteers around the world on our team.

McLean: We're still wrestling with all the questions after our first six months.

WHAT IS THE GREATEST OPPORTUNITY WITH ONLINE CHURCH?

Scott: The opportunity to reach people from different cultures and languages is a great opportunity for online. We've incorporated a multi-cultural element as our worship service online are translated into French, Mandarin, Portuguese and Spanish so online attendees can now select the language of their choice when participating in an online service.

Hickling: The ability to reach places no bricks and mortar church could like nursing homes and places in people's hearts who won't go to a physical church for whatever reason but who will watch online. Another great opportunity is that most of our committed volunteers are 65 and older and now with technology they can connect with people in this way and the limitations of life are no longer an obstacle.

Welty: The opportunity to reach exponentially more people. It gives people different ways to engage and can help people see church as relevant and not outdated. Online is key to how young people interact today so it shows we know people and how they live their lives. We know that people aren't physical or digital—they're just people. They don't see themselves in two camps. Digital lines can engage people quicker and differently.

McLean: Reaching people who would never set foot in a church including people with bad church experiences in the past who will attend online. The stories we've heard from our first six months of offering online services are a great reminder that online is bringing people back to church and changing mindsets.

WHAT IS THE GREATEST CHALLENGE WITH ONLINE CHURCH?

Scott: I think many pastors fear the online concept will take people away from onsite attendance, but our research indicates otherwise. Our online ministry is another front door and side door into the

church. One challenge for us as a church is that there are lots of cool tools available and it can be easy to get distracted and try too many things.

Hickling: As a pastor, my challenge is knowing that there are real people out there who are suffering, hurting and have real problems and burdens and that I'm limited in how I can reach out to them. I'd like to give them a hug and look into their eyes, but I'm limited to a phone call or a text message. There are certain distances that technology can't bridge but we must trust that God can. We know it's better for them to be online with us than to not be online. While Calvary is in Florida, I live in Nashville TN and have worked remotely for the last twelve years. God has positioned me to understand the feelings of disconnection and isolation and have an empathy for our online attendees who often feel that way.

Welty: We've trained ourselves to evaluate ministry, but online metrics are different. So, we're flying by instruments sometimes not by sight.

McLean: Working in creative ways to create genuine online community as an online church.

WHAT DO YOU WISH YOU KNEW THEN THAT YOU KNOW NOW?

McLean: Everything! We tried to under promise and over deliver. We're trying to figure it out and don't have all the answers. We do know that you can't please everyone, so you need to know what you're trying to do. Getting the lead pastor's vision and alignment with online church is key. For us, our vision is to use online as an on-ramp for attending a physical church.

WHAT SUGGESTIONS WOULD YOU HAVE FOR A CHURCH CONSIDERING LAUNCHING AN ONLINE CAMPUS?

Scott: At Seacoast, we're high on production and excellence. Online church can either be really well done and highly produced or it can be raw and personal. Both approaches can be effective. One idea churches can try is to post a short message each week online that can be real and uncut to help people connect to the church. If you're going to broadcast the whole service, then you should bite the bullet and get good equipment.

Hickling: First, you need to define your motive. Know your why. Don't do it just because you're feeling pressured to do it or to be cool with technology. It's been our genuine love for people that's driven us. We want to reach people who are spiritually hungry. Second, you need to dedicate yourself to it. It takes someone on staff who has the margin in their schedule to engage with people. You can't lump

online into other ministry roles. People respond to love and attention and you need to have someone who can provide it.

Welty: Just start and be comfortable figuring it out as you go. Remember that when you started your traditional (onsite) church service that it had to grow and develop as well. Don't apply an "innovation tax" to something new but instead give it the space to grow and develop over time. You need to have one person who will be thinking about online church as their primary ministry focus.

McLean: Start with streaming your services so you're doing something. Don't feel like everything must be perfect before starting. Don't compare yourself with other churches. Start where you are. Stay focused on the one person who needs to hear the message.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

• What steps can your church take to help online participants and in-person attendees become better contributors and not remain consumers?

• How can your church help both online participants and in-person attendees be better evangelists and invite others to join them in watching your services and attending onsite?

• What can your church do to better engage with online people you'll maybe never meet?

• How do you feel as church leaders about people who could come to your church but choose instead to watch online?

• How will you address the issues of whether to include online attendees in your total worship attendance count?

• How long does an online participant need to watch your service before you count them as part of your attendance or as a worship participant?

• How can you better determine how many people are watching online from each screen? And how can you better identify who those people are and what their spiritual needs are?

• What's next for your church in terms of taking your message online? And how will your online strategy impact your church's future ministry staffing plans?

ABOUT THE SPONSOR: RESI

Every church has different philosophical reasons for how and where they stream their services. However, whether a church is simply streaming for those who can't attend in person, or creating an interactive online community, the stability and quality of the stream is critical. An online environment can easily feel disconnected from a live experience, and if a viewer experiences buffering, stuttering, or other distractions in their stream, they will abandon the stream altogether, often after a single interruption.

Statistically, 31% of people leave your livestream at the first buffering wheel, and another 55% after the second. We created Resi to give churches the same streaming technology that previously only high budgeted broadcasters such as NFL teams could afford, and invented and patented the first technology to do so over the public internet.

Since 2014, over 700 churches around the globe have trusted Resi for mission-critical content distribution. Resi helps churches support immersive, distraction-free online experiences by providing resilient streaming technology enabling consistent high-quality transmission, at low prices for the church.

Streams may also be simulcasted to many other online platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Roku, Apple TV, etc., in order to most effectively reach desired audiences. Through Resi's platform, churches may create excellent online worship experiences that closely mirrors physical campuses, encouraging viewers to start attending (either digitally or in-person), participate in community (online or physical), give financially, and experience the best representation of the church as possible, whether watching for the first time or returning.

Contact us at sales@resi.io or https://resi.io

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