Building Relationships in Livestream Worship

Livestreaming a worship service extends its reach far beyond the physical gathering of a congregation and into the home, backyard, office, or anywhere imaginable. Hosting a live worship event over the internet amplifies the experience certainly, yet it raises an important question: What makes it worship and not simply a broadcast? If worship is relational, what can be done to build relationships in livestream worship?

Before and After Worship

At Philo, a live TV streaming service, managers typically start a video conference meeting by getting to know employees better. "Basically, every day is like kindergarten: 'Tell us something we didn't know about yourself. Share something about yourself.'"[1] Churches can do this by hosting a conversation before or after the worship service. If the number of participants is small and a video conferencing tool is being used, invite worshippers to join a half hour before the service to check in with each other. You can also assign a moderator to lead a more structured discussion after the service ("virtual coffee hour").

More structure may be required as the number of viewers grows. Zoom offers a feature called "Breakout Rooms," which allows the administrator to create subgroups of any size and either randomly assign participants or permit them to assign themselves, allowing participants to take part in more intimate conversations. A group of four hundred, for example, could be assigned to thirty rooms with thirteen participants each, or two hundred could go to fifty rooms with four participants each. Assign a moderator to each room if the group is large or if a more structured conversation is desired.

Discussion questions could range from personal ("What's life like for you right now? What's the hardest thing, or easiest, that you are dealing with?") to something lighter, such as playing a trivia game together, responding to a "desert island scenario" ("What would you bring?") or asking people to share photos with a screen sharing tool.[2]

During the Worship Service

The relational element in the worship service can be improved with a few simple techniques. If streaming on Facebook Live or YouTube Live, encourage viewers to respond to or ask questions using comments or live chat. Video conferencing tools such as Zoom, Skype, or Google Meet offer more tools. The preacher, for instance, could ask viewers, "What questions do you have?" and invite them to respond using the chat function, then answer the questions in real time or read and answer them in a Q & A session after the service. One benefit of the chat function is that everyone can see the questions. Additionally, the leader might ask questions using the whiteboard
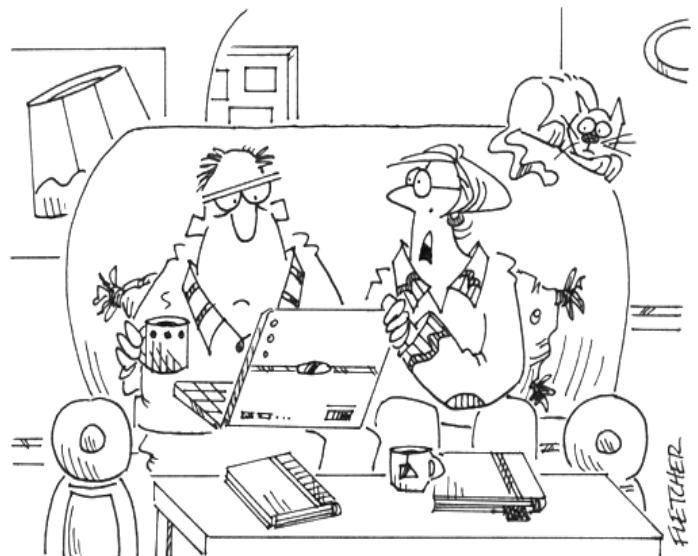
"TODAY'S SERMON IS PRE-RECORDED...
WE CAN PAUSE IT TO PONDER...REWIND IT TO REVIEW...
OR FAST FORWARD TO THE SPECIAL MUSIC."

tool, posting the question at the top of a blank slide or page and inviting others to answer it using the drawing tools.

Live polling offers another, slightly more structured, way of getting answers. Many video conferencing applications allow the administrator to post a simple poll with yes or no or multiple-choice answers, and then display the percentage of responses to each question. Numerous polling apps are available, one of the most versatile being Poll Everywhere (free for a maximum audience of 25 and $120 per year for a maximum of 700).[3] Poll Everywhere's add-in allows the use of PowerPoint slide shows for polling within a video conference, with types of questions that include multiple choice; true-false; and thoughts, questions and concerns. A Clickable Image feature can be used, for example, to post a map of the community with respondents clicking to show where they live, while Word Cloud creates an image of the answers in words that grow larger with more frequent responses.

A New Idea: Two-Way Communication

After the COVID-19 pandemic struck, a few pastors began experimenting with two-way communication between participants on the livestream and those in the sanctuary. In this scenario, the worship leader might ask a question of worshippers and hear the response of a livestreamer through a loud speaker in the room, while those on the livestream hear another response from a worshipper in the sanctuary. It's similar to the experience of a talk show host and studio audience overhearing a phone call from a remote location. This can be achieved through setting up what audio engineers call a "mix minus." In order for it to work, the mixer must have an "Aux Send" plug that can send out a signal that is separate from the main mix. If the signal were not separated, an audio feedback loop would occur, causing an echo every time anyone spoke or sang. In a YouTube show, Paul Richards, a church livestream consultant, talks with several pastors who have experimented with this arrangement in worship.[4]

What about Pre-Recorded Worship?

Some churches opt to pre-record their worship services in order to relieve the stress of producing a live event every week. Putting together a livestream event is complicated and can be stressful. It requires a team that works well together, and before the event even begins, every piece of the puzzle must be in place. The benefit of pre-recording is that it takes pressure off leaders by allowing them to work at their own pace to develop the elements of the service and use editing software to remove any glitches that might arise. However, pre-recording has its disadvantages, often requiring more time than running it live would take as leaders edit the final product into a more perfect form. Most importantly, pre-recorded events may lack the thrill that comes from taking part in a collective event. A simple solution suggests itself: pre-record elements of the service (hymns, special music, or the sermon) and run the rest of the service live. It's still a live event even if portions have been pre-recorded.[5]

The Relational Part of Livestream

Riverside Church in New York City began livestreaming its services in 2015. Founded in 1930, its leaders knew it had to innovate in order to reach a new audience. Amy Butler, the church's senior pastor, said, "I love the power of livestream because I know that the relational part of what I'm trying to project from the pulpit is reaching people's homes, even if I can't be there myself."[6]

1. "How To Make Video Meetings More Real" *Talking Tech with Jefferson Graham*, 8/6/2020, https://art19.com/shows/talking-tech.

2. Paul Richards, "Using Zoom Breakout Rooms After Church Services," May 18, 2020, https://streamgeeks.us/using-zoom-breakout-rooms-after-your-church-services/.

3. Emily Esposito, "The Best Online Poll Apps and Social Media Polls," March 19, 2019, https://zapier.com/blog/best-poll-apps/.

4. Paul Richards, "Beyond Live Streaming: Two-way Communication Technology for Church," https://youtu.be/gdMEyDh9V-c. For a general introduction to setting up a mix minus, Ray Ortega, "How To Setup a Mix Minus," https://youtu.be/au47Ferbxfc.

5. Matthew Fridg, "Pros and Cons of Live vs. Delayed Church Video Streaming" *Church Tech Today*, October 19, 2015, https://churchtechtoday.com/2015/10/09/pros-and-cons-of-live-vs-delayed-church-video-streaming/.

6. [Case Study] How Livestreaming Church Services Can Grow Your Congregation," Vimeo Livestream, https://livestream.com/blog/case-studies/livestreaming-church-services.