



# Streaming Video Is NOT the Same as Church Online

This article is from Church Leaders by [Allen White](#).

Church online is direct-to-camera. Church online is interactive. Church online is an intentional effort to disciple a growing online congregation. Streaming video is passive. With streaming video (live or recorded), the viewer is an observer, not a participant.



**CHURCHLEADERS**

The church has got to get this right, because according to some estimates getting back to “normal” could take up to three to four years (if it ever does). From recent conversations with pastors, the average church has about 30 percent of their people attending in-person. But, there are far more people joining for worship online. In fact, most churches are seeing larger online attendance than their normal worship numbers. One pastor I spoke to yesterday said that a year ago, they had 550 in worship. Today, there are 200 worshipping in-person and more than 1,600 worshipping online. How are churches discipling their online congregations?



Online worship services require a tighter shot. The services are shorter. Sermons are more like 20–30 minutes than 45 minutes. The pastor needs to speak direct-to-camera because the sermon is going to the living room. There’s a big difference between speaking to a big room and speaking to a small screen. The church, in general, did a better job at church online before people started regathering for in-person services.

**Church online is NOT merely streaming an in-person worship service.**

But, as people are coming back, even just a small percentage of the congregation, the temptation is to speak to the few that are gathered and ignore the online worshippers. This is both rightly and wrongly so.



A pastor cannot ignore the people gathered in the room, but a pastor also cannot create a passive experience for the larger group who are watching at home. This reminds me of a moment about 30–40 years ago when churches were transitioning from traditional worship services to contemporary worship services. Many churches could not immediately make the jump. After all, if you alienate the base, then the giving goes down, and the pastor gets fired. So, churches offered separate services for traditional worship and for contemporary worship. A few tried “blended” worship, but Stuart Briscoe once said, *“If you blend contemporary and traditional, you end up with contemptible!”*

By streaming in-person worship services, you end up with contemptible. If you speak direct-to-camera and ignore those gathered in-person, your people will think that they’re watching a TV preacher. But, if you speak only to the room and ignore the online congregation, you’ll lose them. I believe it’s time for churches to adopt two worship styles: an in-person service and an online service. The in-person service isn’t streamed. It’s created specifically for the people in the room. The online service is created specifically for the online congregation. It’s direct-to-camera. It’s shorter. It’s more interactive. The online service moves people from observing to participating. Why do this? There are more people “out there” than there are “in here.” This will be the case for a long while.

## **Church Online Needs Next Steps**

A year ago online ministry was just a novelty, but in 2020, online ministry became a necessity. For a few months, the church regarded online services as a band-aid until things returned to normal. Today, no one knows when normal will return or what normal even is. That’s okay, because there is a larger opportunity online. Just look at your metrics.

How are you connecting with your online congregation? What next steps are you offering them? Do you even know who they are? Every weekend, you need to welcome visitors. Every weekend you need to collect their information by email or text. Then, you need to challenge them in their next steps just like you would an in-person guest.

Put your membership class online. There are no more excuses for not being able to attend. When your membership class goes online, people have 168 hours per week to participate. Put your growth track online. Saddleback church just put CLASS 101–401 online after doing it live and in-person for 40 years! (*and as of 8/30/2020, Saddleback added 600 new members through online CLASS 101*).

How are you capturing information? How are you offering next steps? Church online is no longer just a stop gap; it’s church.

## **Church Online Needs Small Groups**

While content is great, people need conversation and community. Whether groups meet in-person or online, or whether groups are comprised of your church members or people you’ve never met, there is an opportunity to serve. Don’t take sign-ups for online groups. People will ghost your online groups that way. Instead, invite people to meet with people they know on platforms they know. There are many ways for groups to meet online, you just need to give them opportunity and permission along with some training and support to get started. Give these new groups a copy of my book, *Leading Online Small Groups*, which helps groups get started and helps established groups go online.

Churches with online small groups in place are faring far better than churches without online groups. There is a lot to process. There is a lot of fear and confusion in the world. People need to gather with others who will listen, care for them, and point them back to God in a personal, individual way. Online groups can accomplish this for those who are not ready to meet in-person yet.



## Church Online Needs Opportunities to Care and Serve

People need an outlet for ministry. The coronavirus pandemic has forced people to mostly stay home and to venture out very little. This isolation is taking a toll on people's mental health. It's not good to be alone, thinking only about yourself.

Years ago a prominent psychiatrist, Dr. Karl Menninger, was asked a question by an audience member at a conference, *"If you knew someone was suicidal, what would you recommend for that person to do?"*

They audience expected Dr. Menninger to recommend immediate and intense psycho-therapy. Instead, Dr. Menninger replied, *"I would tell them to go over to the other side of the tracks and help someone in need."* It's healthy to help others. It's unhealthy to be overly focused on oneself. (If you or someone you know is suicidal: 1-800-273-8255).

There are many needs in our communities. People need food. Parents need childcare. People need to know that someone cares. Encourage your online audience to participate with the church in serving your community or to just find a need and fill it.

Early during the pandemic, I developed a list of ways people could practice the "one anothers" of Scripture digitally. Smartphone usage is WAY up. Why not use your phone to encourage others? You're on it anyway.

## Church Online Needs Reasons to Give

In a recent interview with NPR, David Kinnaman, president of the Barna Group, said, *"I think also it's really going to change the way people think about their donation relationship with local churches as well. There'll have to be an even greater demonstration of the value that a church brings not just to those who attend but also those who are part of this community."*

While all of the things listed above will certainly add value to your online congregation, churches must show how they are helping the community. Where are these dollars going? After all, those who are worshiping at home aren't receiving the benefit of the building or the staff. But, beyond this, people need teaching about giving. Generosity is a spiritual discipline. It's a sign of spiritual maturity. As your people grow, they will also grow in giving.

## Concluding Thoughts

The American church is in a precarious moment. *"As many as one in five churches could permanently close as a result of shutdowns stemming from the coronavirus pandemic,"* according to Kinnaman. *"Obviously, there will be a lot more online attendance than ever before, even after all churches reopen. I think this digital church is here to stay."*

I see two camps in the church right now. There are those who've been hunkering down and waiting for the coronavirus to blow over so things can get back to normal. These are the churches that are in the most danger right now. Then, there are those churches who are embracing this disruption as an opportunity to meet the practical needs of people, re-evaluate their current ministries, reposition themselves for digital ministry, and embrace the opportunity of reaching a lost, hurting, and broken world online.

Which camp is your church in?

