

Virtually Engaging Your Church Community, Techniques for High Value Digital Connections

By [Alison Istnick](#)



While we witness our government, businesses, family members and friends struggle to effectively function in our new version of normal, the local church has found itself in a unique position to minister during this chaos. Being forced to shift standard ministry paradigms, they are operating in uncharted waters, an experience both exhilarating and unnerving for ministry leadership. What many are discovering, is that while people are in isolation, the church's impact has become significantly larger. Houses of worship, whether new to streaming or not, are reaching new audiences well beyond brick and mortar confines, and are finding that the world, along with their local community, is watching.

A vibrant church community located in Central Massachusetts, Crossroads Community Church (CCC) had already been broadcasting their weekly service for nearly ten years. Adrian Gates, CCC operations director and media consultant, explains how the state's stay at home advisory and closure of all non-essential businesses has affected his church's outreach. "We've been streaming for eight or nine years now, and have been building up our online technique, so it hasn't been a difficult transition for us up to this point. What we have really noticed is the numbers of the broadcast went up."

This uptick in online viewers is a trend seen across the board among churches. Experts say, as a result of the isolation and general anxiety experienced by many in our country, people are

grappling to find comfort and a sense of community, leading them to search from home for spiritual guidance.

Connecting Via Streaming Using Online Comments

Who could have imagined that greeting congregants face to face and personally welcoming a new guest with a handshake would not be possible in today's current reality? At CCC the Guest Services team has taken on a slightly different role of actively scanning for guests online, using the comments section, during broadcast services. Gates explains, "If someone is new to our broadcast, we ask them to simply comment the number "one". The Welcome Team, which usually would be at the church entryway and in the Welcome Center, is busy moderating the online chatter prior to, during and after services to keep up with who's asking for assistance and then giving them resources — maybe sending out a Bible or inviting someone to our new digital Growth Track Class. Usually this class is presented in person right after church, but we're trying a different version where people can attend the class together the following evening online." To further assist online participation, CCC is providing a digital connection card with an area delegated for prayer needs.



Church People Can Count On

CCC staff and key volunteers are picking up their phones and reaching out to make sure people within their church stay connected. Phone outreach has become a means to discover who in the community needs assistance. "If somebody has a need, like running out of toilet paper or something that's very practical, we're trying to find out and meet those particular needs, however we can in the safest way possible. Nobody should really be suffering through this alone. If they have a need whether it's spiritual,

physical, or mental, we want to be the church that people can count on," says Gates.



Infrastructure, Changing Times Changing Needs

Like many faith communities, CCC realized that their sanctuary's technical infrastructure designed for weekend attendees wasn't suited to best serve the at-home audience.

For instance, side screens that flank either side of the stage are used to project song lyrics for those seated in the congregation, were no longer necessary during broadcast-only services. A large onstage video wall newly installed at CCC just prior the global pandemic is providing the perfect backdrop for streaming. The pastor and worship leaders are recorded alongside bright, clear supporting graphic images, thus eliminating any disconnect the at-home audience might experience if standalone graphic images were inserted into the live stream.

With safety precautions in mind, Crossroads Community Church is producing online services using only volunteers and staff who are essential for the production. The sanctuary loft is used to position a team member whose responsibility is monitoring streaming output. The sound booth, located in a different area, is occupied by the audio engineer and another position that manages song lyrics.

If your church has been considering the future investment of a video wall, then [this](#) can help you determine if this is a strategic option for your ministry.

On a typical Sunday, Crossroads' Lead Pastor, Bryan Tomes is known for high energy sermons. He likes to interact with his congregation by walking down to the front rows where he greets people during the sermon. "Now," says Gates, "he's using just half

the pulpit and occupying a much smaller area than he normally would. We've been able to concentrate our lighting fixtures, since we don't have to be extra diligent in keeping up with him."

Without congregants in the sanctuary many churches are placing production equipment in audience seating. Gates shares, "we've added rented cameras and placed them in locations in the audience. We normally wouldn't be able to have access to these angles, but we currently are not obstructing someone's view, or having them obstruct the camera. These new and optimal camera angles help keep the broadcast fresh, both in terms of presentation and for helping retain the audience." The church also added rentals to its current roster of gear. "All our special equipment is rented. The changes have been hard on our media partners, so this gives us a chance to support local businesses and they had a good selection of equipment."



From coast to coast church techs are busy prerecording segments of weekend services that they then can roll into the streaming experience. In addition, many are making major adaptations to their usual Sunday service programming. At Crossroads, "We are doing almost the same service, which is a 30-minute block of worship, short announcements and offering, and the sermon. We did cut out video announcements, in part because there is less to discuss. We also have the person doing the announcements collect the offering since it's all one section now," says Gates.

Connecting to the Homebound

During the CoVid-19 crisis the lead pastor at Crossroads has been reaching out to his congregation using two main vehicles of communication. The first is their Sunday morning service and the second is a weekly web show called "Talk About It Tuesday" where,

according to Gates, Tomes and his wife have been discussing various aspects of living during these unusual circumstances. “Pastor Tomes is addressing critical issues and is focused on helping people spiritually through this confusing time and trying to bring about unity — because this isn’t a time to be tearing each other down. People need to make choices that are good for their community and not necessarily judge people who are making different choices, which seems to be a trend, especially on social media,” says Gates.



Streaming Newbie?

For Gates and Crossroads Community Church the entry point into their streaming endeavors came about suddenly back in 2010. “There wasn’t time for questions or a game plan over the course of weeks and months to figure out how to best launch our streaming,” says Gates. “We ran out and grabbed all the webcast equipment overnight, and then set it up really quickly doing our best to catch up as we went. I think our experience is relevant to now because there are many churches in a similar situation where they’re grabbing the opportunity and going for it. For many churches streaming has become a matter of survival to keep their congregation together.”

With this perspective in mind Gates encourages current church-streaming newbies. “If you’re just starting out and you’re extremely budget conscious, there’s no reason you should feel bad to just broadcast from your phone directly to Facebook, or your Cube or whichever platform you think is going to work best. Most people with a decent cell phone, one that’s been released in the past two or three years, will be able to get decent picture and sound in a well-lit space. So, if you’re a church that has a lot of nice big windows in your sanctuary, you could just kind of experiment in

there. Some congregational experiences have better lighting at the pulpit, so you might find that stage lighting looks great on camera or you might find that you’re better off sitting in the pews. Be flexible on how you do things.”

Fundamentals

It’s a mantra known in the tech community that people will endure a broadcast with less than great quality lighting, or less than optimal video. But most people won’t tolerate a broadcast if they cannot clearly understand the spoken word.

Gates relates, “if there’s a compromise that needs to be made, you probably want to make sure your sound is as good as it possibly can be. I’ve seen a lot of pastors recently broadcasting from their home office and maybe that’s not just because they must be at home. Maybe they could go into the sanctuary or cathedral, but once they got in that large space, the sound would just fall apart.” Gates notes that acquiring even a simple microphone, one that can plug directly into your phone can help to broadcast a clearly heard message.



Investing in Service Streaming

When a church has money to invest in equipment to enhance and improve streamed services there are fundamental factors to first consider. “Streaming platforms don’t give you a great variety of tools to improve on your lighting and sound. So, you must get those right first. Do you have enough lighting for what you need to do, and do you have an appropriate microphone? If you connect a simple camera to your laptop and put it out to YouTube or Facebook, even without a streaming service in the middle, you’ll have a better broadcast. And if you have the money for a streaming service that’s

an added bonus. Your production doesn't have to have an expensive set design or video wall or any of those things. It needs to really focus on just communicating in a simple way that's clear and doesn't cause anybody any pain," says Gates.

Gates notes two main features that a church can benefit from a streaming service provider. The first is finding a provider who will let you go out to multiple places, conveniently. "We're on both Facebook and YouTube at the same time, and technically we're also on our website and our mobile app at the same as well. For us, Living As One streaming provider has been really good to us. We actually met them and viewed their product at WFX."



The second must-have feature when shopping for a streaming provider? "That you can actually get ahold of someone on Sunday mornings," says Gates. "Living as One understands this is prime time for us. There have been other companies who've been very difficult to work with, especially on weekends, and if they get back to us three days later it's really not helpful."

Social Streaming Solutions

Nate Anderson, Marketing Manager with Living as One streaming provider finds himself encouraging churches to take advantage of the opportunity that social distancing has created, and to not be afraid to get creative with their online experience. "Church leaders are seeing higher attendance than what they typically see in their worship space and online, and a new global outreach. We've seen churches using tools like simulated live services, streaming from pre-produced events, strategic streaming to social media, and creating content and streams to share positive messages during the 167 other hours of the week from a usual Sunday service," says Anderson.

Churches typically find a streaming provider once they've experienced the ill effects an unreliable broadcast. Anderson explains, "Research shows that with an average audience, 40% of viewers will leave by one buffering wheel and 70% by two. Having a reliable, high-quality platform will reduce streaming complaints and increase viewer retention and audience size over time."

Accordingly, poor quality streaming can also be negatively impact online giving. "A church member that can participate and view services online is much more likely to give while they are watching, which alone can justify a monthly fee for reliable streaming that provides an improved online experience for all," says Anderson.

Streaming provider, Living As One has developed a solution which insures protection against interruptions in the streaming signal. They protect against this issue by resending and correcting data on a 2-minute delay. This enables many more viewers to watch, even on bad internet connections, and reduces streaming complaints.

*For streaming inspiration, a recently hosted "[Church Online Streaming Summit](#)" features leaders from churches like *Elevation, Bethel, and others who provide encouragement for churches, and share ideas and tips on how to improve broadcasts.**

BANDWIDTH Considerations

One overwhelmingly common issue with online streaming is bandwidth availability. Gates explains, "You want to make sure you have enough bandwidth, and a lot of people mistakenly concern themselves with download bandwidth. When you're broadcasting, if you want to have reliability, you need to have a pretty strong upload bandwidth. Your ISP or streaming company would help you determine what you need for your goals. For us Living As One made a recommendation as to how much upload speed we needed, because those limitations can really hurt you. It's always the weakest part of the chain that determines what your quality is, and for example, if you're trying to broadcast something in HD, but you have a very weak signal, you can still probably get it out, but it won't look HD quality. And that may impact how many people want to watch it on a television and how long they're willing to watch."

A Final Note

Gates advice to those who are just starting their streaming strategy is to not feel overwhelmed. "You'll get better as you go. If the pastor is preaching from his cell phone, and that's all you have going, I can relate to that experience. Ministries shouldn't be discouraged, and they shouldn't feel like they need to compete with these giant churches with super huge budgets. Yes, they have great viewing experiences, but everybody's got to be what they think is right for their congregation right now. And for some people that means simple beginnings, and they should focus on just doing the best that they can do, from where they are.

