

Is Livestreaming an Epic Failure for the American Church?

The church has left more than the building.

In the past few months, many have abandoned online church.

Hopes within the church were that online services would be a parachute. Christians jumped out of their buildings and were not sure where they would land.

The parachute did open. The first few weeks of the online church were super successful.

The Barna Group reported: "Early on in this process, pastors say that their church service's online attendance was higher than a regular in-person Sunday service (59% vs. 49% last week) and the proportion of those who report that attendance was less than a typical, in-person Sunday service (20% vs. 33%) declined."

The first few weeks of online church were over the top. Most churches reached more people through livestream than a regular Sunday morning service.

Hold up. The narrative shifted.

The online church became an epic failure within the first six weeks of the churches being closed.

Pastor Carey Nieuwhof said, "As far as online attendance goes, despite an initial surge, post-Easter 2020, only 18% of pastors now report that their online attendance is higher than a typical in-person week. This means for 82% of pastors, even online church attendance is flat or declining, which is surprisingly like pre-COVID numbers where only a minority of

churches were growing.”

This is bad news for the American church. Church attendance is in dramatic decline.

The church is fighting to keep its influence and impact. It’s a real struggle. This is not the first fight for the church.

“We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed” (2 Cor. 4:8–9).

The church is no stranger to hard knocks, persecution or setbacks. The church is resilient and robust.

God stands over His church and His people.

Jesus said, “on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18).

Online Church Is Distracting

Attending church has many benefits. You can drop off the kids and enter a quiet sanctuary. If you are early, the atmosphere is like no other: peaceful music, hushed morning whispers and saintly smiles.

There are few atmospheres similar to the church. The online church experience has its own challenges.

We are home with the kids. We sit in our most casual atmosphere (the place where our worst habits manifest).

Family members talk during the worship and discuss the sermon while the preacher is preaching. There are drawbacks.

Many of my friends multitask during the online church. The national statistics show that 30% of online viewers do more than one task while viewing their church service.

Is it fair to say that online church is less effective than

attending a service? Not sure. But the distractions are not favorable.

The Barna Group reported:

“Practicing and non-practicing Christians have different routines during online services. For example, while 3 in 5 practicing Christians (64%) say they still pray along with prayers, only 2 in 5 nonpracticing Christians (41%) say the same. This trend is similar for other practices, such as households watching services together at the same time (42% practicing Christians vs. 21% non-practicing Christians) or singing along with worship (40% vs. 23%).”

Online church averages 53% participation while the online leaders are praying and singing worship songs. Not great!

Online Church Hopping

Yes, believers are church hopping online also. Church hopping in America is not uncommon.

Pew Research reported: “One-third of practicing Christians (34% vs. 16% non-practicing Christians) has also virtually attended a church other than their own in the past month; indeed, we see one-quarter of practicing Christians (26% vs. 12% non-practicing Christians) notes that, during the pandemic, this has become typical of their online attendance.”

The online church has created an unfortunate competition. Local pastors are competing with national speakers. Most churches in America are online Sunday mornings between 8 a.m. and 12 noon.

The choice is yours. The options include Joel Osteen, Jentezen Franklin, T.D. Jakes or your home church? No pastor wants to compete, and we shouldn't. But it's here.

On-demand content and livestream are a game-changer.

But the caveat is knowing which way it will break.

Rejecting technology is not an option.

David Rainer weighs in:

As a church, we should develop an appreciation for the technological advances that the Internet has to offer. Our young Millennial families are kept abreast of the latest events because of their technical involvement. Skype, Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, Foursquare, Blogger, etc. are all forms in which this generation keeps in constant contact with the world around them. While there are many pitfalls in this social networking web, there is also plenty of benefits. Keeping leaders and the church in front of these young families through social media is an essential tool for reaching out and maintaining the church's activities in the forefront of the busy lives of the millennial family.

But some believe livestreaming services provide a good excuse for people to stay home.

Why People Choose to Livestream

David Murray says:

- No social distancing.
- No mask to wear.
- No travel.
- No shower to take.
- A great choice in bad weather.
- Convenient.
- Comfortable (watch in your pajamas).
- You don't have to sing (or pretend to sing songs you don't

know).

–No fighting the crowd.

–Comfortable to introverts.

–No dealing with difficult people.

–No pressure to give.

Digital reality never equals reality. The online church cannot provide a human touch. A church service at your fingertips is convenient, but can it replace the benefits of attending.

But computer screens are not a comparable substitute to a face-to-face encounter. The “Livestream church” can show what’s happening, but it strains to relay a genuine experience.

Pastor Karl Vaters said it best; “Online church is *the real* church, but it’s not *authentic* enough.”

Will physical church return to the glory days in America. Not sure.

“Let us not forsake the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but let us exhort one another, especially as you see the Day approaching” (Heb. 10:25)

See you at church. {eoa}

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