

Virtual Faith: A Guide for Disciple Leaders

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The implications of COVID-19 pandemic go well beyond our faith and our ministries. The pandemic has shut the doors of our places of worship, reduced our financial support, and hampered our ability to serve our congregations and communities. Disciples' leadership is providing excellent support, but leadership and ingenuity in our churches are required to guide us successfully into the future.

With the wisdom and creativity that comes from God, we can turn this crisis into a blessing. Even as we are beginning to see the end of strict isolation, we know that it will be a year or more before this pandemic is over, and that we are forever changed as individuals and as a body. But out of struggle, emerges strength and opportunity. We can now minister to people previously unreachable. State and country boundaries are invisible to virtual experiences. Mobility issues are not a concern and physical vulnerabilities are not compromised when we can worship in our homes. Just as our scriptures are full of stories of God's people overcoming adversity and suffering with strength and creativity, we too will be stronger and more resilient because of this pandemic.

It is important to remember that this information is not, for the most part, instinctive, but learned. Start wherever you feel comfortable and expand your knowledge a little at a time. This can feel very overwhelming, especially on top of the pandemic. Be prepared to provide support to your church members, who may be resistant and stressed about connecting virtually. We all need a little extra compassion in these days. It is my hope that this guide will lessen the stress and provide ideas to improve and simplify virtual faith for your church community.

Communication

It is important that everyone: community members, guests and potential visitors, can quickly and easily find information about your church. There are many avenues for communication and the more we use, the more church members feel connected and the more people outside your membership can connect.

Website

Whether it is simply a landing page or a dynamic, interactive website, all churches should have a website and all other communication should point back to it. The website should look fresh and updated. It should provide basic information for worship, programs, and outreach services. It should contain *accurate* contact information: email, phone number, mailing address, and social media links. There should be a quick and easy way to make an offering, and simple instructions for *other ways* to give.

From a quick google search, a stranger should be able to find your church and the day and time of worship, and step by step instructions for any virtual worship or activity. The stranger should be able to easily contact leadership and participate in any educational or spiritual enrichment programs that are offered. There should be a way for a stranger to be added to a communication list to receive updates. And anyone should be able to make a donation easily and find other ways to serve.

According to WebsiteBuilderExpert, here are recommended free websites platforms: [Wix](#), [WordPress.com](#), [Strikingly](#), [Webnode](#), and [Mozello](#).

Snail Mail

In this time of isolation, receiving a note or card from our faith community is precious and priceless.

Email

It is important to stay in touch with your community. Sending a weekly email with updates, reminders, a prayer or devotion is advised.

Social Media

There are many different social media platforms, but the primary ones used by faith communities are Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube, and Facebook. Overtime, it is a good idea to explore them all, but Facebook is the most widely used. Through Facebook, your church members can communicate with each other, it can act as a virtual bulletin board, and can reach people outside the membership. Updates about worship and activities can be given, pictures, and videos can be added, and worship can be uploaded or streamed live.

Phone

Youth do not spend much time on Facebook or checking email, but they text. Sending a weekly text to the youth is advised. [EZ Texting](#): Get information out quickly to a large group with this text-version of the classic phone tree.

Our oldest members love to hear from church friends. Set up a calling tree and make sure your senior members are called regularly. [Freeconferencecall.com](#): is one option for multiple people.

Podcasts

People of all ages listen to podcasts. Consider recording regular podcasts on sacred texts or popular topics.

Donations

The days of receiving all our donations through an offering plate are over. Even when we are able to worship in person, it will not be advisable to pass a common plate that everyone touches. While it is important to make it easy for people to mail a check to the church, many people pay for everything electronically and they need options for electronic giving. Some forms of electronic giving have transaction fees, but it is better to get the donation than not to get it.

Work with your financial institution to set up electronic fund transfers, or automatic withdraws, from your members. You can also encourage people to set up automatic payments from their bank's online bill pay system. Setting up an account with a service like Paypal (paypal.com) or Square (square.com) are also options.

Here are several platforms designed specifically for churches to receive electronic donations, Set up an account and encourage members to download the ap to their phones.

Givelify: <https://www.givelify.com/> - Tithley: <https://get.tithe.ly/> - Vanco:

<https://www.vancopayments.com/>, Give: <https://givewp.com/addons/recurring-donations/>

A/V

There are many aspects of church that can be done virtually, whether because of the pandemic or in order to expand to include people who otherwise could not participate. Worship, faith education, fellowship, counseling, funerals, weddings, blessings, office hours, and meetings can all be held virtually.

There are three general video options: Live-streaming, which is broadcasting your live worship service through the internet; Recorded streaming, which is uploading and broadcasting a pre-recorded video on the internet; and Video conferencing, which is an internet video call where participants can see and hear one another.

Audio

Think about audio first. If the audience cannot hear or understand you, nothing else will matter. Make sure your computer or smart phone records clearly. Some people find that an audio-only recording is all they need. Here are some options for audio: Audacity is a program that allows you to record to your computer, laptop or mobile device, www.audacityteam.org, and then simply post the recording to your website. iPhone voice memo allows you to air drop the recorded file to your computer and then post. Some Android phones also come with pre-installed voice recording features apps. A voice recorder allows you to transfer the recording to your computer with a simple USB card. Zoom recording allows you to record yourself and it saves both a video and an audio-only file to your computer for you to post. If you choose, you can pair your audio recording with images or the service bulletin on Power Point that you post or email out.

Video

Think about these things before you begin. Is your internet connection fast enough to stream? What equipment do you have? (A tripod for your phone, camera, or iPad is advisable.) Where will you record or stream? Set up a background view that you want people to see. Be sure to have good lighting, pay attention to shadows. It is helpful to have someone besides the officiant host the platform. An additional license for streaming is required by [CCLI](#) or [OneLicense](#).

On a Mac computer, PhotoBooth is a tool that lets you record a video of yourself, using the computer's built-in webcam and microphone.

It is helpful to use a video encoder, which takes your video signal and compresses it into a stream of data that can be sent over the internet. Recommended software encoders include: Open Broadcaster Software, Stage Ten, Streamlabs OBS, XSplit Broadcaster, and Wirecast.

Choose a platform based on your needs: YouTube, Facebook, Zoom, Ustream, Dacast, Streamingchurch.tv, Sunday Streams, Streamspot, Googlehangouts, Skype, Switcher Studio

FacebookLive is easy, free and suits most needs. You must have a Facebook account and your church must have a Facebook Page. Open Facebook page, On the heading bar titled "Create," click LIVE and follow the instructions. You can "Go Live Now" or "Schedule a Live Video."

Zoom is very popular and a great option for faith communities. They provide free tutorials: "Getting Started with Zoom Meetings" (a 30-minute session geared for first-time users) and "Zoom Meetings" (a one-hour session covering the foundational elements of Zoom for anyone hosting meetings). Zoom has

a free option for a maximum time of 40 minutes for a small group, so anyone can try it out. You can use the free feature to capture a sermon, homily or reflection. Hit the Record button at the bottom of your screen. Once you are done, hit the Stop button, leave the meeting and the program saves a video file to your computer. You can then upload the video to your website or social media page.

You can pay a monthly Zoom subscription that provides more features for a longer time period and for larger groups. Zoom is wonderful for fellowship groups and educational classes. It allows for interaction among all those gathered and has break out rooms for small group discussion. The chat feature allows people to message the whole group or individuals in the gathering with questions or comments. With Zoom you can “Share Screen” and use PowerPoint to show the words of prayers, scripture readings. You can also “Share Computer Sound” which will allow the music playing on your computer to be heard by everyone in the call. We suggest that you mute participants upon entry, have participant video on, participants share screens off; private chat disabled during worship and events but enabled for discussions or fellowship times. If your church has a Zoom account, you can connect that Zoom service to Facebook Live for worship or other events, making them more accessible to a broader audience.

Things to Remember

Lagtime – it takes longer for people to hear/see and respond in virtual world.

Congregational Singing/Reading/Reciting in unison does not work well with the sound on for all.

Have an informal practice session.

Mic every voice and instrument for broadcast purposes.

Pay attention to camera angles. Turn on all the lights and test different camera placements.

Use a larger screen like an iPad, instead of a phone so you can see more detail of what you're broadcasting.

Use a stand for the camera or iPad.

Think about privacy for your community, like prayer concerns during virtual experiences.

Get permission to use anyone’s image but especially images of children in your community. Do not share images of children who are in foster care.

Let people know your service will be Live Streamed before the event and provide exact, detailed directions of how to connect.

Viewers do not need to be a member of Facebook to view organizational pages or to see a Facebook Live event.

Encourage engagement in whatever way works. Have them text, email, post on social media or “chat” in Zoom.

Ask the people in attendance to share the post. Sharing dramatically increases reach.

Breathe deeply and remember that this is not intuitive. Disciples’ pastors and church leaders rock!