



Best Practices for ONLINE WORSHIP

THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN CANADA

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The virtual choir at Knox Presbyterian Church in Guelph, Ont.

Living Faith affirms that “The church lives to praise God. We have no higher calling than to offer the worship that belongs to God day by day, Sunday by Sunday” (7.3.1). COVID-19 has compelled many congregations to move worship online, but our calling remains the same. Worship is central to who we are, whether we meet in-person or virtually, and as such needs to be carried out with attention and care. Even if you have been leading

worship online for years or have recently started as a way of adapting to COVID-19, it is important to evaluate what you are doing regularly. Here are some best practices to help guide your evaluation.

God as the Focus of Worship

The first thing worship leaders might consider when reviewing the online worship offered by their congregation is how they are fulfilling the call to offer “the worship that belongs to God day by day, Sunday by Sunday” (7.3.1). Ultimately, worship is about praising God not about creating the perfect experience for worshippers. Reviewing the basic elements of Presbyterian worship to ensure they are present in your online services can help ensure that your church’s worship remains focused on God.

- Some of the elements of worship that *Living Faith* names are as follows: preaching of the Word, praise, prayer, teaching and fellowship. Do your online worship services include these elements?
- *Living Faith* also states that “Worship draws us into the work of Christ.” How are your online worship services equipping and inspiring people to engage in the work of Christ in their daily lives?

Online Worship Reflecting the Identity of the Congregation¹

There are so many different types and styles of worship services online. This level of variety is inspiring, but it can also be confusing. Watching other congregation’s services online, worship leaders might wonder: Should we be doing what *they* are doing?

¹ The ideas for this section were adapted from a presentation given by the Rev. Alex Douglas (Family Church of Heritage Green) for the Presbytery of Barrie on the topic of creative online worship for their “Church... Differently” online conference (Oct. 20, 2020).

The answer to that question is *perhaps, but only if* what they are doing *fits with the context* of the congregation.

Focus on the congregation's strengths and do what you do best. Some churches have great music, some have a strong intergenerational focus, some use art in creative ways. No congregation does everything well. Whatever you do best, do it with excellence in the virtual space.

- If you were to ask congregation members what they loved best about in-person worship services pre-Covid, what would they say? Have these things been done virtually?
- Name four specific things that are important to the congregation in worship. How are these being prioritized in online worship?

Adapting your Strengths to Work Well in Virtual Spaces

While it is important to focus on the congregation's strengths in worship, simply doing what you would normally do during in-person worship online is not always the most effective approach. The elements of worship that allow for engagement, reflection and connection in person, such as passing the peace, saying prayers in unison or singing hymns together, need to be adapted for the virtual space. Here are a few examples of how churches have adapted their strengths to work well in a virtual space:

- A church that regularly takes prayer requests during the prayer portion of the service recognized that it would not work to have multiple people speaking up during their online worship service. They ask people to submit their prayer requests ahead of time by email or to enter them into the chat box or comment section during the service.
- A church that had an amazing choir realized that singing multiple songs in worship was not feasible because it took too much time each week to make virtual choir recordings. They decided to cut down on the number of hymns during online worship. Instead, they pre-recorded one song and, in place of a second hymn, simply shared an instrumental version while projecting the lyrics.
- A church that has a strong community focus realized that they wanted to make the prayers they lead online more personal. They invited people from the congregation to submit pictures of themselves and their neighbourhoods to use as a backdrop during the prayers of intercession. They also used photos from The Presbyterian Church in Canada's missions that are supported through Presbyterians Sharing: <https://presbyterian.ca/sharing/photos/>

Drawing on the Gifts of Congregation Members

This is the perfect time to draw on the gifts of those in your community for worship. There are always talents hidden in the congregation that could be drawn upon, so it is important to ask. Think of the gifts people normally share during services (music, scripture reading, greeting, technology), but also consider other type of gifts that could enrich the online worship experience, such as the visual arts, spoken word, photography, dance or drama. Don't rely solely on Sunday announcements to invite people to share their gifts, also put the invitation in your newsletter, on social media or make personal invitations. Do not hesitate to ask for specific things. For example:

“We are doing a sermon series on forgiveness. Is there anyone in the congregation who would be willing to create a piece of art to accompany the series?”

“We would like to deliver candles to each household for people to light during our Easter services. Are there any candle makers in our congregation who we could ask to make the candles?”

“We will be reading Jeremiah 18 in a few weeks about God as the potter and us as the clay. I’ve heard that you make clay pots. Would you be willing to bring clay in on the day of the sermon and create a simple pot during the virtual service while the sermon is being preached?”

Active Participation in Worship

Worship is something we do together as the people of God. If participation is not prioritized, it is easy for those joining the service from home to passively consume rather than actively engage. Online worship is even an opportunity to get people who might not regularly participate in in-person worship involved. For example, someone who is uncomfortable reading scripture in front of the congregation might be comfortable pre-recording a video of themselves reading.

- Invite different people to read scripture, pray, offer reflections and share musical gifts regularly. Think beyond those who normally get asked to do these things. Reach out personally to new people.

A personal invitation is often more effective than a general announcement in encouraging participation. If possible, invite children and youth to participate in the liturgy as well.

- Encourage worshippers to enthusiastically participate throughout the service by singing the songs, praying the prayers and adopting the postures they would normally adopt during an in-person service. It is best if they keep themselves on mute while they do this so that it does not disrupt the worship leaders.
- Share your prayer requests through the comments or chat functions of whatever platform you are using. If people aren’t comfortable sharing publicly, offer the option of sending the information by email to church leaders ahead of the service.
- Consider what everyday household objects could be used as part of worship. You could invite worshippers to simply light their own candle at home or set up their own sacred space for worship on the coffee table, counter or kitchen table with objects that help them connect to God.
- Could you have people pre-record small testimonies or stories of where congregation members are seeing God in their lives ahead of the services? Play these during the service to have more voices present.



First-ever online communion at Knox Presbyterian Church in Toronto, Ont.

Prioritize Connection

God created humans with a strong desire and capacity for connection. Those joining your congregation for online worship are looking for many things, including to connect with God but also with others. In-person worship involves greeting each other, engaging with each other during the service and fellowshiping together afterwards. Are you providing these opportunities in your online worship services?

- Encourage worshippers to greet each other at the beginning of the service. Invite people to say “hi” to each other using the chat box feature or turn on their cameras and wave at one another.
- Always assume that there is someone participating in your online worship for the first time. During the opening of worship, welcome guests and introduce those who are leading worship for that week. Indicate how people can connect further with your congregation. For example, “please join us for virtual coffee hour after this service or visit our website to see how you can participate in one of our virtual small groups.”
- Assign a greeter or two to each virtual worship gathering. Ask them to welcome and connect with people through the chat function of whatever platform you are using.
- Encourage people to pray for each other during the week.
- Host a virtual coffee hour after the service so that people can chat informally with each other.



Online conversation at Point Edward Presbyterian Church in Point Edward, Ont.

When Planning Services Think about Those Joining from Home

This is an especially important question if you have a hybrid service with some people gathering in person and others participating from home. It can be easy to forget that those worshipping from home have different experiences than those sitting in the pews. Strive to make a personal connection with them.

- If you are livestreaming or pre-recording services in the church’s worship space, avoid wide shots of the sanctuary. Instead, make what leaders are doing during worship the central focus of the shot.
- Make sure the speaker is well-lit and close to the camera and microphone. It can also be helpful for those viewing if the speaker is wearing something that creates a visual contrast with the background. Encourage worship leaders to look directly into the camera, not their own images on the screen or at paper notes.
 - ◆ There are teleprompting apps for tablets that can easily be used by setting them next to your camera. You can also write your notes on a whiteboard and place it just behind the camera.



Online worship at Wasaga Beach Community Presbyterian Church in Wasaga Beach, Ont.

- Words of welcome are extremely important. Welcome those who are joining worship from home and orient them to what will be happening in worship.
- Announcements are also important because they let everyone know how to get involved with the church community. Take the time to do them and to address those joining in from home directly.

Meeting Regularly with the Worship Team to Pray and Plan

Those leading online worship will benefit from meeting regularly to discuss how it is going. The point of gathering is not just to plan, but to cultivate spiritual fellowship amongst the people leading worship. The spiritual connection cultivated between worship leaders will come through in the worship experience.

- When gathering to discuss worship, move beyond a focus on the technical aspects. Ponder what the Holy Spirit is doing in online worship. Where is God leading you?
- Before the worship service begins, pray with everyone who is involved in worship that day (musicians, readers, children's time facilitators, etc.). Pray that the technology will work well but also that you'll be able to make strong connections with those engaging in worship from home.
- Be sure to thank other worship leaders regularly. The pressure on ministry staff and volunteers has increased and shifted during this pandemic. Words, acts of kindness or small gifts are wonderful ways to thank your worship team.

Engage Children and Youth

Those who are participating in online worship are not just the adults in a household. Whether kids are actively listening and participating or going about their day in the background, they are an important part of your church community that should not be forgotten in online worship.

- What opportunities are there for kids to participate in your online worship? Consider including an engaging kid's time during the worship service that is full of props, stories, concrete examples and "I wonder" questions.
- Are you offering Children's and Youth Ministry programming in addition to online worship? For example:
 - ◆ Recorded videos of someone from the congregation, perhaps even the children themselves, telling a Bible story and send it to families.
 - ◆ Send activity/worship bags to families with activities connected to Bible readings for the week.
- Online games and virtual fellowship nights for youth.



Camp Geddie virtual talent show.

- Are adults in your church community connecting with families?
 - ◆ Sunday school teachers or the minister sending letters or videos to the children.
 - ◆ Pastoral care phone calls to families to see what they need currently.
 - ◆ Online small group gatherings for parents.

The Importance of Collaboration

With the arrival of COVID-19 in early 2020, ministry leaders were scrambling to get their services online. Now that most congregations have some type of online component to their ministries, it is a good time to prioritize collaboration. For example:

- Has your church been struggling to produce children's content for your services? Why not see if there is another Presbyterian church that is producing weekly videos for kids? They will likely be happy to have your church use their videos.
- Check out the online worship services of churches in your area. Are there things that they do in their worship services that you like? Connect with the church to find out how to do it yourself. Or, better yet, see if you can do it together.
- Are there other Presbyterian churches in your area? Reach out. See if they would be interested in coming together to host online services. Last summer, a presbytery invited each church within their bounds to record a summer service. Then, Presbyterians across that area had the joy of tuning in for a different church's service each week and ministry leaders were able to take summer vacation without suspending worship.
- Think beyond collaborations with other churches. Are there organizations in your area that you could partner with in mission or ministry during this time? Perhaps there is someone from a local food bank or shelter who'd be willing to come and share a word about what they are doing during your online service. There are also many Presbyterian Church in Canada missions that you could feature as part of your services. Contact the national office if you would like to speak about how to incorporate Presbyterian mission stories into your services: <https://presbyterian.ca/contact/>.

Timing, Length and Style of Service

The current general advice about online worship is that it should be shorter in length, but broader in scope. While people may enjoy a 90-minute service in-person, it is recommended that online services do not go past one hour in length.

- Think of the online worship service as one part of what you are offering people in terms of worship and faith formation.
 - ◆ Instead of spending extra energy on long or elaborate services, create a time for online prayer during a weeknight, a small group Bible study on Saturdays or other midweek church experience that will allow for people to connect with each other and God.
- Congregations have a bit more leeway to experiment in this unusual time, so why not take advantage? Consider having a special service at a time the congregation does not normally meet or in a style that is new. For example, if there has been a desire to try a Taizé service, why not try it now? Or try an evening service once per month.