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It's Not Enough to Broadcast a Service. Churches Need to Foster Community.

What pastors can learn from plummeting online attendance.

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Since the coronavirus forced worship services to move online, nearly a third of church-goers have stopped attending church, according to new Barna [research](#). Among millennials, it's even higher: Half of those who used to go to church have stopped since the pandemic started.

It is not clear why. But when attendance plummets, we need to stop, reflect, and answer that question.

Perhaps people are “[Zoomed out](#).” Even if people liked video conferencing before lockdown, weeks of online video meetings for work, school, and social gatherings have caused many to dread logging on for one more hour on Sunday morning. But could that really account for nearly a third of churchgoers?

It could be the music. Singing along at home in front of a screen is not the same experience as singing in church, surrounded by fellow believers. Lag time and occasional buffering glitches make it incredibly difficult to enter into the music and find that “[flow state](#)” many associate with good worship. But most churchgoers do not rate music as the most important part of their experience at church. The Christian author Gary Thomas identified nine “sacred pathways” that lead people to connecting with God. Only two of them prioritize music.

North Point Ministries, similarly, found that musical worship is a top priority for maybe 14 percent of regular churchgoers.

Another reason could be that church members live in areas with low-bandwidth or non-existent Internet, making live-streaming services all but impossible. In 2018, the Federal Communications Commission [found](#) that 18.3 million Americans lack access to broadband Internet. As commissioner Jessica Rosenworcel explained, it's "not that they can't afford it. It's simply not available." This lack of access is especially true in rural parts of the country. But that only accounts for 5 or 6 percent of Americans and wouldn't seem to explain the dramatic drop in church attendance since March.

Let me suggest another potential reason. There's something about going to church that hasn't yet sufficiently translated online. Churches are understandably focused on what happens in the sanctuary one hour each week. Long before the global pandemic, a lot of effort went into creating that 60 to 90-minute event. Once the pandemic hit, that same kind of energy went into translating that service into an online format. But something got lost.

On Sunday mornings before COVID-19, while church staff planned and prepared for what happened *inside* the sanctuary, something else was going on *outside* in the foyer, in the atrium, on the patio, in the welcome area. Something less planned, and for some churches, less intentional. People stood around talking. They shared their lives. And at the edges of sanctuaries, or in dedicated rooms, people prayed together for various needs. Before COVID-19, the church building bound together worship, community, and pastoral care.

When worship services go online, what happens to that bundled good? For many church members, these points of personal connection disappeared. Some may have made an effort to recapture it on Zoom or Facebook Live—with instructions to virtually say hello to someone "sitting next to you"—but not many. My guess is this loss of community and pastoral care has dramatically impacted church attendance.

Whereas the worship service is something that churches can produce and broadcast at scale to whoever will watch, community and personal connection are "anti-scale." That means they resist mass reproduction. Being personally known and cared for is almost always a one-on-one experience and can't be mass produced. Worship services, on the other hand, tend to be constructed using a one-to-many model of mass production—something is produced by one person and distributed to many. It's possible just to observe the worship service as an audience member with very little participation.

The sanctuary part of the church service is seemingly easy to broadcast online. What happens outside the sanctuary, though, is incredibly difficult. But if community and pastoral care are what people need and are no longer receiving from the online service, then it makes sense why so many have stopped attending.

When churches prioritize their worship services the same way they did pre-pandemic, it is easy to overlook other seemingly peripheral activities, but those activities make church attendance a critical, life-giving experience for so many. The truth is, we may have misunderstood why a third of congregations were showing up to church every Sunday. It may be the care and comfort people received from their friends and pastors. In

fact, where we might assume the worship service facilitates community, it might be the other way around: community and pastoral care support the worship service.

For many, the “peripherals” are actually central. And if that part of church has gone missing because church is only being live-streamed, then people will look elsewhere to address their relational and spiritual needs.

The Barna research found as much, too. Not only for dropouts but also for those who continue to watch church online. The survey reported that “practicing Christians across the US are seeking prayer and emotional support.” In the transition to a [broadcast-only format](#), some churches may have lost sight of these other important priorities. The worship service has been [unbundled](#) from community and pastoral care. By going online, the church building no longer holds these three elements together.

So what can churches do?

While the Barna research seems troubling at first, it also offers crucial insight. Attendance for services—online or offline—can no longer be the only metric church leaders use to account for the spiritual and relational health of their church or their congregation. Churches must look for new metrics to account for the community connections and pastoral care that are happening elsewhere in their online and offline ecosystem.

Churches would be wise to develop new metrics in this time of dispersion. Consider tracking prayer requests coming in through the church’s online forms. Some churches have already seen these increase. Churches could also measure phone calls pastors and staff are receiving from and making to their congregation. Metrics should [measure what matters](#). Metrics need not be thrown out, but instead of tracking attendance as a proxy, the church can explore new metrics that could highlight, facilitate, and empower community and pastoral care.

COVID-19 could also re-focus our attention on member-to-member interaction—community. The church building served as a kind of social platform. Community grew organically in that space. What spaces can we create in the COVID-19 era that encourage and foster that experience where people feel cared for, connected, and known? The pandemic took something away, but it doesn’t have to be the final word.

There are many encouraging examples of churches experimenting creatively, advocating for community. The best ideas seem to start with considering a congregation’s unique personality. All Saint’s Episcopal Church in the Ravenswood neighborhood of Chicago, for example, is a historic church that had a tradition of a monthly birthday and anniversary celebration. Once quarantine began, their tradition went online. People emailed a photo of themselves to a minister who compiled them into [a photo montage](#) that the church integrated into the Sunday morning livestream. The online context gave participants a chance to become more involved and see themselves and others in the online worship. The practice helped people feel connected to each other.

The efforts need not be high-tech, though. Some churches have retrieved old-fashioned approaches that communicate care in deeper ways. A church in New York arranged members into [groups](#) of about 15 and appointed leaders to check in with them, see if they needed prayer, food, or other supplies. While the pastoral

staff may be unable to connect with every church member, dispersing the load catalyzes ministry to happen across the church body, not just from the head.

A Baptist church in South Carolina invited members to write letters to nursing home residents who are unable to have visitors and feeling especially lonely. The extra effort of these mailed [letters](#) communicates well beyond the simple written words. Again, by simply organizing a creative plan, church leaders could mobilize members to minister outside of the sanctuary.

In Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, one church printed and posted signs inviting people to call or email for any need. While some respondents needed physical provisions, others feeling lonely just [called to chat](#) or ask for prayer. Another area church offered spiritual directors who could provide “compassionate listening” to anyone who called. And a third, like the church in New York, organized a phone tree, which, like the mailed letter, communicated more than a simple text or group email.

There are probably as many ideas for fostering community as there are communities. The point is that COVID-19 is an invitation for churches’ creativity. As [a friend](#) of mine likes to remind me, “In the midst of devastation, there’s an opportunity for innovation.” It’s a timely word for the church in an unprecedented time.

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