



A Beginner's Guide to Online Church During Coronavirus

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak has dramatically changed our daily routine, including the way we worship. Churches around the globe are impacted. Yet they continue to comfort, educate, and lead their congregation through the uncertainty that lay ahead. While a physical presence has always played a role in the way ministries interact with communities, the Coronavirus outbreak presents the unique challenge of taking church solely online. Some churches already embrace online ministry. Others need to relaunch their online church strategy. And many find themselves in uncharted waters. It doesn't matter where you are in the process—we're in this together. While this guide is built for beginners to provide an overview of tech tools, digital volunteer ideas, SEO, and online presence best practices, it also serves as a refresher for those that may be a little rusty at being an online church. Together, let's unpack how to create the best experience for your congregation when you're holding church 100% online.

Adopting Tech Tools for Churches

It's easy to get overwhelmed as you begin creating an online atmosphere for worship and engagement. Take it one piece of technology at a time. Just like carpenters, what ministries put in their toolbox helps ensure they're prepared for the job at hand. As you begin planning for online ministry, fill your toolbox with tech that makes the most sense for your church's size and budget.

Here's a brief rundown of tech tools you can add as you begin. Know that many of these are free right now due to the Coronavirus outbreak.



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Website and Facebook

If your church isn't online in any form, you need a website or Facebook account. You don't have to sign up for both at once. Choose one to get started immediately, and then over time, you can grow your digital ministry by adding the other. These platforms are the base you'll build from as you move church online.

Live Streaming

Live streaming can be as simple or complex as you'd like, but it does require additional equipment like an encoder, a camera, and a microphone. Plus, you'll need to have extra people to help with production. For many churches, live streaming is a great choice. But, if you don't want to invest in the equipment or have enough staff, Facebook Live is a simpler option.



Mass Messaging

Reaching your entire church community in one email, voicemail, or text keeps people informed about changing church hours and events during times like the Coronavirus outbreak and natural disasters.

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Conferencing App

There's a range of apps out there used by schools and businesses for video and phone communications. Churches can use these for small groups, Sunday School, and internal meetings with staff working remotely.

Remember, you don't need to adopt every tool to have a successful online church. If you're at the beginning, choose 2: Facebook or a website, and online giving is a nice starting point. Once you're confident with your current tech solutions for an online church, add a new one to expand your reach within your community.

Equipping online volunteers to help

Connecting and meeting new visitors and active churchgoers is a crucial part of building an impactful online church. Volunteers play an essential role in personalizing online services, but they need to know what to do. Every church is unique, but here are a few ideas:



- Enlist volunteers to be Digital Greeters, so they can meet people as they sign on for a service and have a private, real-time conversation with them
- Schedule volunteers to call your elderly members daily on the phone to chat and see if there's anything they need help with
- Have volunteers post updates and messages on social media and your website, as well as respond to comments
- Ask tech-savvy volunteers to assist with live streaming or recording sermons to add to your church app

When recruiting new volunteers, continue following the proper due diligence for background checks. You'll want to ensure online Sunday School and other activities for children are run by people that pass the appropriate screenings. Volunteers that help manage giving or financials should also be screened to prevent theft.

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Inspiring older generations to participate online

While older adults have adopted technology into their everyday lives, 77% need assistance when it comes to learning how to use it. Because the elderly are most vulnerable during the Coronavirus outbreak, you'll have to teach them to use tech remotely. Here are a few tips to educate and inspire older adults to use technology that connects to the church.

- Begin communicating through channels older adults are familiar with such as a phone call or email
- Avoid tech talk. Instead, use easy language to share the steps to set up online giving or listen to sermons
- Take it one step at a time and be patient so that you don't overwhelm them with too much information
- Have them write down the steps. This way, they can refer back to their own notes and handwriting if they get lost
- Celebrate the little victories to keep their confidence up and help them move to the next step
- Address online safety to ensure they create strong passwords and understand the strong security measures in place by online giving providers
- If they're hesitant, explain the value of technology during times like the Coronavirus outbreak

Learning a little about SEO

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is more advanced, but if you'd like your website to reach more people, you may want to learn a little about it. In a nutshell, SEO is the process that helps your church website rank as high as possible. Here are 4 simple ways to improve your church's SEO:

Create a Google My Business Account

A simple (and free) way to improve your church website SEO is by creating, managing, and authenticating your Google My Business account. When someone searches for you online, your account profile will appear on the right-hand side of the Google results page. It can include service hours, your address, photos, and more. This simple step makes your church information quickly available, so people won't have to search harder to find you.

Ensure Your Site is Mobile-Friendly

Google penalizes sites that aren't mobile-friendly and/or load slowly on mobile devices. You can use a tool (like the ones offered through Pingdom) to monitor the performance of your site, check load times, and make improvements.

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Mindfully include keywords in your content

The keywords people put in the search box when looking for your online church should be naturally reflected in your content. You don't have to get too technical, but do think about these questions if ranking higher is a goal.

- Who is searching for online services at church?
- What words are they most likely using in the search box?
- What words would you use if searching for an online church service?

Once you've explored those questions, you should have a list of keywords you'd like to incorporate in your website. The most important rule is that you naturally incorporate them and never stuff words into your content. Moderately adding the keywords will get you better results than repeating them for the sake of trying to get ranked. Stuffing keywords not only causes a bad user experience, but search engines can penalize websites for it.

Use Keywords in Image Names

If you have a website, you've probably uploaded photos and videos of your church in action. When you hover over the picture, you'll see the image's alt-tags. If you see "img6426.jpg" instead of "student-camp," go through and update those alt-tags.

You may not have time to implement SEO best practices right away. But as you get more familiar with hosting church online, circle back to your website and how well it's optimized for searchability.

Keeping your online church active

Once the Coronavirus passes, and we shift back into our normal routine, many people will continue to worship online. That's why you must stay active to cultivate an online community regardless of your church size.

Be responsive

When someone reaches out with questions on social media or comments on a blog, respond quickly, so people know there's a real person available to connect with.

Be straightforward

Your Call-to-Action (CTA) should be clear and direct in what you want people to do next. If you want them to click a link in an email that takes them to a recording of your most recent service, tell them that!

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Be yourself

It can be intimidating responding to people online and going live with your services. At the end of the day, just be yourself. It's okay if there's a typo in your comment on Facebook, or if the camera angle isn't perfect when you're live streaming. The goal is to connect and engage with your community when people need a place to turn to for comfort and leadership.

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A final note about church online

While the current need for churches during the Coronavirus outbreak is to get online quickly, you can also do this strategically. Our team stands beside you and is providing free tech and training to help you get started or build out your current online church more fully. As we navigate through uncharted waters in the coming weeks, we'll be here for you to provide support and tech solutions that keep your church connected.