

Zoom Fatigue? Not in Ministry!

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Imagine if Jeremiah was forced to do ministry during a coronavirus pandemic. How would he lament to an unfaithful generation that was already Zoom fatigued from school/work? Further, how would he lament a generation of some seniors that were initially skeptical, even fearful, of Zoom and many other digital technologies. Oh how Jeremiah would have complained that God was his adversary by providing him such difficult circumstances to minister in. In Bible study or committee meetings, every time someone attempted to speak but was on mute, I can see Jeremiah throwing his hands in the air proclaiming, “My soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is” (Lamentations 3:17 NRSV). During worship recordings or streamings, each time the computers failed, cameras didn’t work, or mics weren’t working, he would cry out to others about God, “He has made my teeth grind on gravel, and made me cower in ashes” (Lamentations 3:16 NRSV) as he waited for the technology to be fixed. As more and more members, particularly entrepreneurs, experienced financial hardship from lack of customers, or furloughs or laid offs and the finance committee told Jeremiah of the downward giving trend from “this time last year,” pre-COVID, he would declare, “Gone is my glory, and all that I had hoped for from the LORD (Lamentations 3:18).

The great hope that was before the church at the beginning of 2020 before the March 2020 shutdown of this country and the world took a serious hit when our operations moved online. Some ministries were well-equipped to make the transition; others had to expend significant resources to get caught up, and still others simply ceased to connect in meaningful ways. The majority of us have to admit that we were not ready to move our operations online. We lamented, like Jeremiah, how we were not prepared to replace in-person worship with weekly, meaningful worship experiences. The church rushed to get online, just as other business entities rushed to get online, and we quickly realized that many of our members were fatigued from being in front of a screen during the week, which is why they hungered for the in-person connection that the sanctuary provided them. They thirsted for the experience of the holy in the church building with their fellow church members with little care whether devices were charged, internet connections were strong enough, sound was loud enough, and the myriad of other issues that arise in online ministry.

What a yeoman’s task the ministers accomplished last spring! They designed new ways to meet their congregations virtually, while serving as tech support to ensure their seniors had the technology, while seeking to engage the youth, while still teaching hope in the midst of uncertainty and despair. The minister’s job did not get easier when the world went online. Quite the contrary, it got decidedly harder.

However, just as Joseph forgave his Brothers, so too did the ministers forgive COVID-19 because we found in time that we could minister to and through COVID-19, proclaiming to the pandemic on behalf of our churches, “Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today” (Genesis 50:20 NRSV).

Equity Issue for Seniors

Consider first the equity issue that got resolved when we all went online. Barriers to entry exist in church, particularly with in-person worship experiences. Surely, we pray such barriers to entry don't exist, and we do all that we can to minimize or eradicate them, but unintentionally they are there. Many of our sick and shut in simply cannot get to the building. During the week, when we have evening programs or Bible study or worship services, many who have families must weigh the cost of getting off work, getting the kids together, getting over to the church, and then getting back home late before they must get up the next day and do it all over again. For many of those families, simply going home after work was a more convenient routine and a necessary fact of life for their own sanity. Many of our seniors do not like to drive in the dark and thus miss evening worship experiences. The explicit or implicit dress code of the church becomes a barrier to entry for some. All of these barriers crumble like the walls of Jericho when we move to an online environment. Many churches, including my own, worked diligently to ensure seniors had internet connections and computing devices. (Side note: You'll be surprised how many persons in your congregation have extra desktops and laptops they are not using and will joyfully donate to a senior member of the church so they can have access).

In addition to getting everyone connected, many churches found that streaming on multiple platforms offered maximum coverage to their members. Our church services were streamed on our website, our app, our social media pages, and via television streaming devices such as AppleTV, Amazon FireStick, and Roku. This increased availability gave the computer and TV user alike equity with respect to access. Whether it was Sunday morning worship, Wednesday evening Bible study, or a ministry/committee meeting, all could participate. Surely, some were more adept at the technology than others, but the length of the pandemic gave sufficient time to practice such that by the time of Advent 2020, truly hope, peace, and joy had been restored. Everyone didn't love it, but we understood that for this new normal, it was a necessity and the people adapted. We found more efficient ways of conducting business, we identified creative ways to serve communion virtually, and we progressed forward.

Keeping Members Viable and Connected

Our seniors stayed connected during times of increased isolation and vulnerability. What joy comes to the entire congregation when we log on to a Zoom videoconference call for Bible study and one of our 80+ year old seniors proudly unmutes herself and declares, "I logged on by myself this evening!" Wednesday Bible study expanded from one hour of studying God's Word to a two hour "event." The fellowship hour began an hour before Bible study where members, mostly seniors, would log on and connect. These are the same connections and conversations that would normally occur in the hallways and parking lot of the church, but the environment simply changed from church space to cyber space. Following the fellowship for thirty minutes, we then have prayer meeting for thirty minutes. This time of corporate prayer offers a centering to everyone who is in different locations, but now united in prayer. Finally, we transition into Bible study. Just as persons enter the space of Bible study at separate times depending on when they arrive to the church, so too now do persons enter the videoconference when their schedules will allow. However, the blessing is that now more members are present! Some are in the kitchen preparing their evening dinner,

others are around the table eating, still others are in their dens/offices with their Bibles open and notes prepared, and others are lounging on their couches. As ministers, it does not matter to us how they got into the videoconferences; what matters is that they are there!

For two hours on a Wednesday night, the depression of loneliness is suspended. The feeling of nothing to do and nowhere to go is lifted. The comfort and familiarity of church family and church faces provide stability and certainty in an uncertain world. The Pastor's presence week in and week out, just as it does in the sanctuary, reminds the people of faith that God's presence is with us and shall never leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5).

Use of Still Images and Videos

Prior to COVID, the minister used mainly her voice to teach and preach the gospel. However, being online in the midst of this pandemic has offered many new ways to present the gospel and tell the stories of our faith. Many of us have engaged still images and videos to show maps giving a sense of where certain biblical narratives are located. We all recall when our churches first put in screens and we tried to show such images. Some of our seniors and others with restricted eye sight mentioned that they simply could not see the details we were putting on the screen. COVID-19 has brought that large screen in the sanctuary to the small screen of a laptop or desktop computer right in their living room! The detail that many could not see prior to COVID, they are able to access now. Further still, some ministries do not have screens and digital technology in their sanctuaries, but with everyone at home on devices, they now can engage digital media in ways that were not even considered before.

For my church, I cannot begin to describe how the use of historical art pieces during the teaching moment has brought a vividness in describing events that we did not have before. The use of still images digitally also raises a deeper, yet important discussion of historical accuracy where we can debate not only the accuracy of the art, but what we believe did and did not occur in certain narratives. Members who had only ever studied the Bible from the written word are now studying, considering, and thinking about God's Word from the interpretation of the artists. We have long since known that this deepens the richness of our understanding when we expand the modes and means by which we interpret the scriptures.

The challenge of being online has also brought forth the excitement of video engagement in both Bible study and worship. As a preacher/teacher, I feel liberated to not have to paraphrase or quote someone else's ideas, but I can use their video so many can hear the original author's thoughts from the original author's voice. In the public domain of video sharing, there is a joyfully overwhelming amount of content (theological, biblical, and some practical) on any idea that is to be presented in the sermon and/or Bible study. The diversity of voices that can now be brought forth in the teaching moment is only paralleled by the impact such exposure to video sharing has on the spiritual growth of the church. The consistent modes that we were used to presenting and sharing the gospel in, prior to COVID-19, have now been expanded to endless opportunities to connect with members and guests in exactly the way they needed.

My members have shared with me how much more engagement they find with Bible study now that we are online. They comment on how easy it had become to just

come to the church and listen. Now they are engaging consistently and deeply with the images, videos, and discussions that we are having. We are not tired of Zoom, but rather just getting started! As a teacher of scripture, I was pulled out of my comfort zone of active engagement during our studies within the church. I had gotten used to the location I taught from, where my members would sit while I was teaching, and how they were used to (and appreciated) receiving the material. All of us have been dislocated by this pandemic, but we are not experiencing the Zoom fatigue that is described in the popular media by those who must videoconference for work. Not only are we grateful for the connection, but I look forward to the weekly challenge of expanding the style and method of my teaching.

Expanded Social Networks

Members within the congregation find a challenge as well. Although we never desire cliques in the church, we all acknowledge that a natural byproduct of the repetitive nature in which we meet is that cliques might form. Members generally sit in the same places so cliques form by chairs/pew. Members get involved in the small groups, ministries, and activities that are life giving to them, so cliques form by affinity. However, the pandemic has changed where we sit and what we get involved in. I have personally watched relationships and connections form online that may never have formed before due to sheer proximity. Members are finding that they work in similar fields, know the same set of friends, visit the same locations in Atlanta, and even live nearer to one another simply by being connected online. Previous connections that were not made because we tend to exist within our own bubbles and own networks have now been expanded. The bonds of fruitful relationships and new connections will certainly be a blessing to the church.

New ministry ideas and greater collaborations within the church occur when diverse people get together and brainstorm ways to bless the ministry without the shackles of “what we’ve always done” binding their creativity. The church’s ability to expand our reach, help larger groups of people, and share the gospel with others is helped, not hindered by these expanded social networks.

New collaborations within our church have already offered to the leadership new Bible study series topics, a fundamental change in the way we approach youth ministry, and have begun the discussions of how we make in-person church engaging so that people will want to come back while simultaneously engaging an online/cyber audience that is unable to come back in person due to their circumstances.

Increased focus on the gospel

New collaborations in ministry also lead to new attitudes towards worship and biblical study. Prior to COVID, many of us can admit that ministry/worship, in some ways, had become perfunctory. The limitations of the sanctuary and the church building stifled our creativity of how we would focus on the gospel because we had developed tried and true methods for operating within the building. All who have ever served in ministry can admit that the practices and processes for operations within the building had been developed without the idea of continuous improvement in mind.

We did not design the pulpit and the furniture therein with the idea of moving everything around every three months. The fixed pews in most of our sanctuaries were not designed with the idea of the sanctuary being flexible space to be used for

more than just worship on Sunday. The hymns chosen, songs selected, and sermons prepared were all done in the view of a certain liturgical rhythm that COVID-19 disrupted. And thankfully so! Surely the liturgical calendar continued and certain seasons of the church have come and gone, but from Easter to Advent in 2020, how could the minister preach in an empty sanctuary and not take time to address why the sanctuary was empty? How could we not consider that our members were in their homes with all the trappings of attention stealers that are present in the residence? In the sanctuary, for all intents and purposes, we have a captive audience, so we can proceed business as usual, but online we must be more engaging than the dozens of other options a member has or else we will lose them. Without the limitations of our normal processes, we thought critically about the gospel, how to share it, and how to present it. We shortened our sermons, recognizing that holding a person's attention in front of a screen is different than holding their attention sitting in the sanctuary. The time previously afforded to us after the ushers had closed the doors and a member was essentially "trapped" until the benediction was now gone. Members could log on and log off and we would be none the wiser. In response we dove deep into God's Word, focusing solely on the gospel and its presentation, as we knew this was the truth that we must proclaim to the world in the time and space that was allotted to us online.

In ministry, Zoom fatigue does not yet exist because we have far too many opportunities ahead of us for how we can now faithfully fulfill the great commission in ways never considered before. Zoom has pierced a digital veil. Now all churches, not just some, can bring the gospel into conversations that were being held online that for far too long had been shamefully shunned out of the church building.

Pundits have said that the shrinking of the church will be exacerbated by COVID-19, but the hope that is in my heart joyfully disagrees. Zoom has brought the efficient frontier of online ministry to a broader landscape of churches. We will see not a shrinking, but an expansion, of faith and faithful discussions in the larger "church" called cyberspace. Our definition of the sanctuary will change, and our understanding of Bible study will grow.

Nothing has stopped the movement of Christianity for some two thousand years, and surely, we knew that this corona virus pandemic would be no different. The unexpected joy we received from the unintended consequences of the pandemic has now reshaped ministry for the better. Indeed we are grateful for the equity of leveled access for all to our services, the power of keeping our seniors viable and connected, the use of still images and videos to offer more vivid presentations of what we normally would simply say verbally, the building of new social networks within the church, and the increased focus on the gospel over the perfunctory distractions that occur within the sanctuary. Truly the Lord has blessed us.