

a practical resource
for Lutheran
church musicians

in tempo

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Adjusting Worship during the Pandemic A Perspective

by Tim Getz

At Grace Lutheran Church in Palo Alto, CA, we wanted to keep things as much *the same* as possible, to keep a feeling of continuity, provide a solid rock, and help people feel closely connected to their church home and church family. We are very fortunate to have a video recording ministry already, and we already have six cameras discreetly installed around our worship space, so the only new hoop to jump through was going “live.” We use YouTube as our platform, and people access the services via our church website each Sunday at 10:00 a.m. In addition to all Sundays, we also produced live broadcasts on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday evenings. We did try an abbreviated Easter Vigil via Zoom, which was an interesting experience, enjoyed by many, and worth

doing on this one occasion. Just writing about that could be an entire article, but my overall impression is that Zoom would not be an effective medium for worship on a regular basis.

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We take government restrictions very seriously. In California, gatherings of up to ten people not considered to be in high-risk groups are allowed, and houses of worship may meet in their buildings for the purpose of recording or broadcasting worship. So our entire staff, including our two paid staff singers, plus our fantastic volunteer AV technician, have continued to meet in church every Sunday morning for the broadcast. That's normally seven people. On Easter Day, we added our parish administrator, who is also a virtuoso handbell musician, and two trumpeters. Everyone wears a wireless microphone, and our AV technician blends the feed from each mic in addition to "room" sound in the house mics, to create a very convincing congregation.

One change thus far has been the exclusion of Holy Communion. We have had services of the word only. Beyond that omission, the liturgy has otherwise been exactly the same as we would do on any "normal" Sunday: four hymns, all three readings plus the psalm, sermon, creed, and prayers of intercession. One or both of my staff singers offer a piece of music during the usual time for the gathering of gifts, while the congregation is invited to

make their offering of money electronically. All of us are careful to stay at least six feet apart from each other, usually more like eight feet, ten feet, or even more. I play both organ and piano. The bulletin, with hymns and readings included, is available on our website either for printing at home or for viewing on a screen.

There have been controversies within the wider church and even within our own church staff about the theological implications and logistics for celebrating Holy Communion. Though we have not done so in the first seven weeks since our state's shelter-in-place order began, plans are developing to offer communion in some way on occasion, as our weeks apart may well drag into months. Most likely this will involve a system of delivery of the sacrament to people's homes following our worship broadcast each week, essentially expanding the usual practice of bringing communion to the homebound to a much wider scale.

My choirs and handbell choir are, obviously, not meeting. I have stayed in contact with them by sending a cheerful email every week or two, usually with a link to some music for them to listen to for their own spiritual uplifting and enjoyment. I also

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Hymnal Abbreviations:

ELW: *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*

LSB: *Lutheran Service Book*

CW: *Christian Worship*

Though it's no substitute for direct human interaction, people have even enjoyed greeting each other in the YouTube chat box as the service begins, and sharing the sign of peace in the same way.

typically ask a question or two and invite them to respond to the whole group as a way of staying in touch.

I play hymns in the same way I would if the full congregation were present, although I have backed off alternative accompaniments and mostly stick to the page. We encourage people to sing along at home, and it seems that many are doing so. I play rather short keyboard voluntaries, both because I think long pieces of music are not suitable for the livestream and because I have not been going in to the church during the week and my only practice time has been early on Sunday mornings! It's been a fun opportunity to dust off some shorter, simpler "old favorites." For the Easter season I decided that the prelude each Sunday would be one of the "Eight Short Preludes and Fugues" attributed to Bach.

We normally have a Taizé prayer service one Sunday evening every month. I have been recording and posting online a "mini" Taizé prayer each week. This past fall, I also had initiated a "Be a Better Assembly Singer" class. (We call it "Not Choir," because I couldn't think of a better name!) The part people enjoyed most of that weekly class was an introduction to the hymns for the upcoming Sunday, so I decided to continue that online. I record the weekly Taizé prayer and the hymn videos after church on Sunday afternoons using my iPhone;

they are then uploaded to YouTube and posted on the church website. And I try to remember to share them on Facebook. We may soon experiment with having some musically gifted members of the congregation record pieces of music at home that could be inserted into the livestream at appropriate places.

The whole experience has gone much more smoothly than I would have pessimistically anticipated back in March. Our weekly attendance online has actually been magnitudes higher than it normally is on Sunday mornings. We have people tuning in from all over the world! Though it's no substitute for direct human interaction, people have even enjoyed greeting each other in the YouTube chat box as the service begins and sharing the sign of peace in the same way.

Though it may prove to be another point of lively conversation with our staff, I would prefer that we *not* continue to livestream our services when the time comes that no one is mandated to stay home. I think gathering in one place as a community for worship is an essential Christian value, and people should not have the opportunity to use "I can just watch it on TV" as an excuse to stay home from church under normal circumstances. I would assume that the availability of recordings of the services after the fact will continue, as it has already for over 30 years in our

congregation. If there's one thing I personally may continue doing, it's the weekly video hymn introductions. These have proven to be very popular, and they've been helpful for me in my preparations for the coming week as well.

I wish everyone much patience, joy, and the spirit of adventure as we continue stepping each week into this great unknown. God is with us!



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Photos courtesy the author.

