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## Study guide

# Hybrid church

By Robert C. Blezard

The COVID-19 pandemic has plunged even some of the most technology-resistant churches into the world of digital worship. Swimming in the waters of online worship and finding them 1) not so hard and 2) popular among God's people, many congregations are now looking permanently to become "hybrid churches," offering services that are both in person and online. The transition is filled with both challenges and opportunities.

### EXERCISE 1: FRIDAY THE 13TH

Fans of horror movies may smile when noting that the "digital reformation" began on Friday, March 13, 2020. The pandemic declaration closed many public places, including churches.

- What was that time like for your church? Can you describe the mood of leaders?
- What did you think at the pandemic's beginning? How did the congregation's membership react?
- What did you do?
- Did you think it would last as long as it has? Explain.
- If you had known how long it was going to last, what would you and your congregation have done differently?

### EXERCISE 2: DIGITAL PREPAREDNESS

When the pandemic closed churches, some were caught totally unprepared for virtual worship, while others had some digital infrastructure already in place.

- How equipped was your congregation to begin online services?
- Did you have internet? If so, was it adequate?
- What equipment did you already have? What did you need to buy?
- Did your congregation have people to run the equipment? If not, how did you recruit and train the tech crew?
- How long did it take before your congregation was able to offer some sort of digital worship?
- What did you learn in the process of going digital?



## Study guide: **Hybrid church** *continued*

### EXERCISE 3: “SINK OR SWIM” TRANSITION

Many congregations faced a tough choice of either offering some sort of digital or online services, or none at all. This presented a “sink or swim” dilemma.

- Did your congregation face this kind of situation? Explain.
- How did your congregation cope? What did it take?
- How would you describe the initial offerings of digital worship?
- What were the biggest challenges? Financially? In equipment? In personnel? Other?
- How did your congregation’s digital worship evolve as the pandemic endured?
- What has your congregation learned?
- How would you describe your congregation’s digital worship today? How does it compare to when you first started?

### EXERCISE 4: POPULARITY

Much to some congregational leaders’ surprise, digital worship has proven to be popular among many segments of congregants, especially those who have a hard time getting out of the house on Sunday or who live far from the church. What perhaps was thought of initially as a stopgap measure, digital and online worship seems a permanent fixture in many congregations.

- How did members of your congregation respond to digital worship initially?
- What were the complaints you heard? Were they valid?
- What were the compliments you heard?
- How has the popularity changed since spring 2020? Why?
- Is there a particular group that likes digital worship? Explain.
- What group doesn’t like digital worship?
- Some churches have found a huge bump in “attendance” when they add in the people viewing digitally. How has digital worship affected your attendance?

### EXERCISE 5: JUMP TO HYBRID

Many congregations that have resumed in-person worship since the shutdown in March 2020 are now adapting to offering both digital and live worship, something the article describes as “building bridges” between the two types.

- Has your church managed to integrate digital and in-person worship in the hybrid church model? If so, what have been the challenges? The successes? The future? If not, why not? What are the barriers?
- What is it about live worship that makes it so special?
- Why is it hard to convey that specialness through online media?

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## Study guide: **Hybrid church** *continued*

- Describe the technology and equipment that it takes to do good hybrid ministry.
- Describe the human expertise and personnel that is required to achieve high-quality hybrid ministry.

### EXERCISE 6: HYBRID LITURGY

Worship and liturgy in a hybrid church have to reach two audiences at the same time—those in church and those at home.

- What kind of changes to a standard liturgy would assist the transition to hybrid worship?
- How would a wise church leader work to make the liturgy more inclusive to both in-person and digital worshippers? To make it hospitable to both groups?

### EXERCISE 7: "FIELD TRIP" SUGGESTION

Find a local congregation that has achieved a high-quality hybrid worship service. As a study group, visit that church to learn how members pull it off. What equipment do they have? What personnel? Make an "action plan" to help your congregation get to its next level. Present the plan to your pastor or congregation council for possible implementation.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What opportunities does digital worship offer compared to in-person worship? How can a wise congregation make the most of those opportunities?
- What drawbacks does digital worship have compared to in-person worship? How can good planning and creativity help minimize those drawbacks?
- How has the need to add digital services affected your congregation's mission?
- A hybrid church blends in-person worship with digital worship in a single service. It's hoped that both in-person and digital worshippers will have a similarly pleasing experience. How would you characterize the difference between attending a worship service online?
- Describe your congregation's journey transitioning first to online worship and now to a hybrid church. What have been the bumps along the way? What has been successful? What did it take? What have you learned?
- If your church could turn back time and start over on becoming a hybrid church, what would you do differently? How does the awareness of previous missteps help your congregation plan for the future?
- What is the next step for your congregation in becoming a smoother, better, more faithful hybrid church? How can your study group help plan, facilitate and strategize about that future?



As pandemic restrictions ease, Calvary Lutheran Church in Minneapolis has moved to a hybrid ministry, with in-person worship while livestreaming services on YouTube for people who prefer worshipping online.

# HYBRID CHURCH

*By Ryan Panzer*

## HOW TO BLEND OFFLINE AND ONLINE MINISTRY

The church's digital reformation began the morning of Friday, March 13, 2020. Following the declaration of the pandemic as a national emergency, congregations across the country swiftly moved their worship services online. In just three days, faith leaders developed a new model of church community, experienced through livestreams, social media and video conferencing.

As the pandemic continues, congregations have experienced tension between those who prefer a return to in-person worship and those who wish to continue online. Without a definitive date when all members might feel ready to return, congregation leaders have developed another model. This is the practice of hybrid ministry—a way of being church that blends the offline with the online.

The defining attribute of hybrid ministry is parity of experience. To be a hybrid ministry is to be a congregation that integrates the physical and the virtual with few discernible differences. When congregations plan for and develop their own hybrid ministry, they're committing to building bridges between the physical and the digital so that worshipers have the same access and experience regardless of their location.

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**SIMPLE INVOLVEMENT MIGHT RESEMBLE A PRAYER REQUEST SUBMITTED VIA TEXT OR SOCIAL MESSAGING, OR AN INVITATION TO RESPOND TO THE SERMON VIA FACEBOOK OR YOUTUBE COMMENTS.**

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In this sense, hybrid ministry is distinctive from “digital ministry.” The objective of a hybrid church is not to create a separate, digital version of a congregation, with prerecorded worship services and stand-alone digital content. Rather, the goal is to integrate the online with the offline, to combine the wide-reaching connections of cyberspace with the strong communal bonds of the local congregation.

**Inclusivity and hospitality**

The practice of hybrid ministry depends more on a congregation's resourcefulness than its resources. Low-tech congregations with limited budgets can be as effective at this model of Christian community as those with professional media teams because the key is a consistent commitment to inclusivity and hospitality.

A hybrid worship service begins with inclusive, hospitable language that welcomes the online and in-person worshiper. The low-tech requirement of this is the easiest aspect of hybrid worship, yet it's also the most critical. Without inclusive language, the online worshiper will feel like a second-tier attendee with a back-row seat.

Every component of the liturgy provides an opportunity to extend hospitality to the virtual worshiper. Everything from the greeting to the sermon, the prayers to the announcements could include a word of affirmation for those in both physical and virtual spaces.

An inclusive greeting might remind everyone gathered that they are the church, wherever they find themselves for the service. Inclusive and hospitable announcements might include directions for connecting physically and virtually (Zoom links, URLs, etc.) to each aspect of the congregation's life together. Inclusive preaching and prayers might give voice to the concerns of

those gathered online, inviting virtual attendees to contribute prayer petitions.

Worship planners don't need to mention “digital” or “hybrid” in each piece of the liturgy, but they should provide a consistent thread of hospitable language. Each week the worship planner should highlight where these threads will be most visible.

Beyond inclusive language, hybrid ministry necessitates the liturgical involvement and leadership of those gathered virtually. If those who worship online are offered only the opportunity to passively watch a livestream, they can't contribute to the work of the people. Failing to involve online attendees also creates a second-tier virtual worship experience. Those gathered face-to-face join for liturgy, or the work of the people. Those gathered online sit and watch.

When planning leadership for virtual worship, start with small acts of involvement before designing more complex roles. Simple involvement might resemble a prayer request submitted via text or social messaging, or an invitation to respond to the sermon via Facebook or YouTube comments. Once the worship planner has established a pattern of virtual involvement, they can create opportunities for online leadership roles: lectors, cantors, presiding ministers and even preachers.

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**TO BE A HYBRID MINISTRY IS TO BE A CONGREGATION THAT INTEGRATES THE PHYSICAL AND THE VIRTUAL WITH FEW DISCERNIBLE DIFFERENCES.**

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Not every service needs a lector who records their reading offsite, perhaps at a location that complements the reading. Not every Sunday needs the prayers of the people read via Zoom. Still, creating opportunities for involvement turns worship into a truly hybrid experience.

Conversations about hybrid ministry tend to focus on hardware and software. It's certainly important to attend to streaming platforms, microphone setups and camera positioning, but none of these will create community across digital and physical spaces. Hybrid ministry depends far more on inclusivity than on information technology. At this stage of the pandemic, many church leaders are worried about sustaining their digital efforts. Focusing on inclusivity might make this work more feasible and, ultimately, more durable. †

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