

Don't Lose Your Online Guests:

How to Make Sure No One Falls Through the Cracks

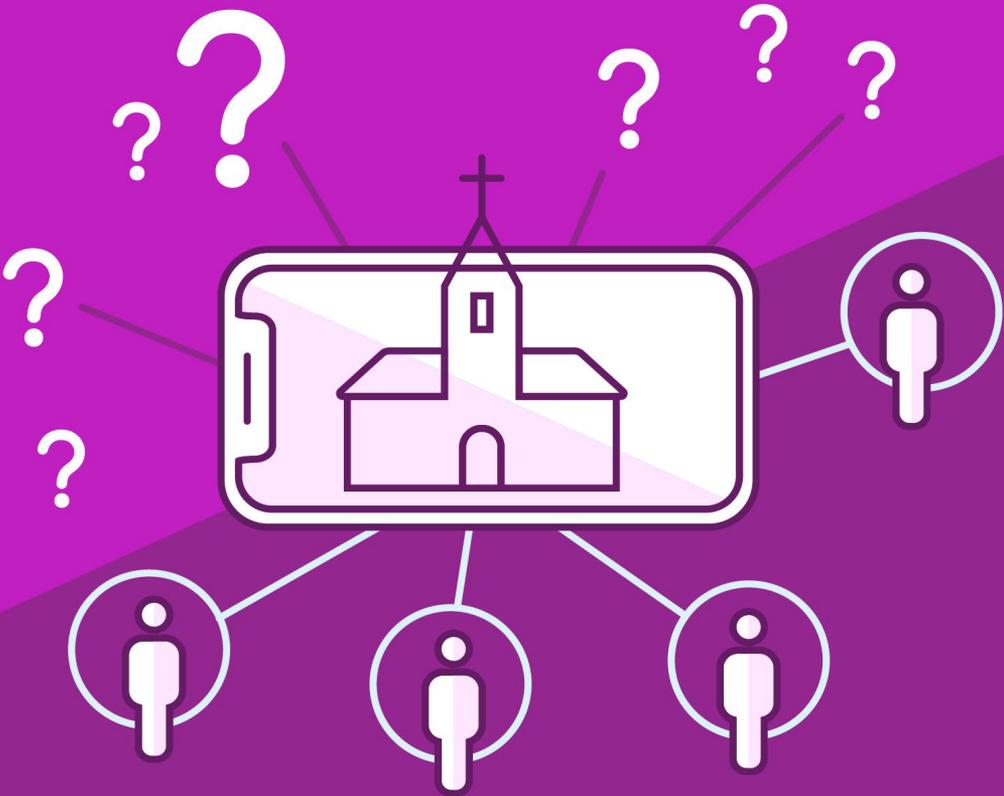


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Not in the Plans

When you sat down at the end of 2019 to chart out your church's plans for 2020, you likely penciled in some big expectations. You plotted out your sermons. You scheduled a few outreach events. You probably decided upon a mission trip or two.

You began thinking about Easter and Christmas and how your church could leverage those big days to reach your community and engage people in further discipleship.

Former heavyweight boxing champion Mike Tyson once said, "Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth."

In March of 2020, we all got punched in the mouth.

After all those plans and those hours of preparation, everything changed. As the world tries to fight back against the encroachment of the COVID-19 virus, nearly every church in the world has needed to change their plans and discontinue in-person meetings in order to stop the spread.

A Historic Moment for the Church

For the first time since the early days of the Church, most congregations in the world did not gather in groups of greater than 10, as we celebrated the most important day on the Christian calendar. Easter is the biggest day of the year for most churches. Historically, it's when people who wouldn't consider stepping foot inside a church, who actually show up, and maybe for the only time all year.

In recent weeks, many people have tossed around the word *unprecedented*. But as your community faces a double whammy of the global health crisis and a severe downturn in the economy, this Easter coincided with a *truly unprecedented opportunity* to share the hope of the New Testament's resurrection message. People were hungry for good news and many were more open to *THE good news* than any other time in generations.

Many churches nationwide that never considered taking their worship service online, have been doing so in recent weeks. Many more, who had long been online, have been trying to figure out how to deal with online services when *they're not gathering in person at all*. It's one thing to have online services; it's entirely different to have *only online services*.

Yet with Easter now behind us, a *new normal* is coming face to face with an *unprecedented opportunity*.

Why Follow-up is So Important Now

Right now you're likely trying to figure out how to ensure people will check your service out. You're sharing your service on social media and encouraging your church community to help you get the word out.

But you realize that your church may have provided much needed hope for your church family and your community on Easter. For you to partner with God to transform lives, you'll need more time. No matter how great your sermon is or how powerful your music is, discipleship is a long-term commitment. Your most important task during big days may not be what happens in the service but what happens next.

Will they return?

In a completely online environment, follow up is even more important than ever before. Your guests have an infinite number of worship services they can attend going forward. While you're not competing against any of those other churches, discipleship (whether it's online or offline) is better done in a consistent environment. If a guest tries out your service one week, and then another service the following week, they're starting over every single week. That's not helpful for them or the churches they're attending.

But let's face it. The worst-case scenario isn't that they check out a different church the weekend after they visit yours. It's that they don't. If you don't get follow up right, they may fall back into old patterns. In a digital-only environment, you're not competing against other churches. You're competing against Netflix, Amazon Prime, and numerous other entertainment options that people could choose to delve into instead of diving into their spiritual development.

People who watch your services through their television or laptop on a Sunday morning, aren't investing nearly as much as they did when they drove onto your campus. Turning you off (or never turning you on again in the first place) is easier than ever.

Follow up has always been critical for churches, often determining whether ministry fruit is sustained long term.

But today, in the midst of one of the most transformative moments in the church's 2,000-year history (and that's exactly what we're in the middle of), follow up is more important than ever.

This ebook will prepare you to follow up on what will be more than just the most important service of your year.

It will be your church's most important worship service in generations.

The Fundamental Challenge of Online Follow-Up

Following up on a totally online worship service is much different than following up on an in-person gathering. Even if your church regularly broadcasts your worship services online for years (or even decades), it's entirely different to follow up when you don't have any in-person ministry to offer.

Who are you?

When someone checks you out on Facebook Live or streams your service from their smart TV, they don't know you. When you're engaging first-time guests in a typical week in your gathered worship service, you're engaging people who have been inside your church. Hopefully, they've met a few people, shaken some hands, and tasted your coffee.

When they visit your church online, they often know nothing about you. They've made no personal connections. You're an unknown quantity. Maybe you have the friendliest church in the county. Maybe you have a top-notch children's ministry. Your online guests have no idea.

There are two sides of this anonymity though. It's not just that your visitors don't know you. Even more importantly, *you don't know them*. In fact, if you don't make it a priority to ask for contact information, you don't even know their names or how to get back in touch with them. They're just a number.

When you notice that the number of views on your Facebook Live broadcast of your service is double or triple your typical attendance, remember what those numbers mean. You get credited with a view every time someone watches three minutes of your live video. Imagine if you were preaching a sermon in your sanctuary and someone walked out three minutes into the sermon. You would have very little opportunity to engage that person with further ministry.

Your biggest challenge when engaging guests after online services, is that you know very little about them. But the good news is you're not the first entity to deal with this challenge.

Consistently providing value

Online businesses—from Amazon to Uber—have dealt with the problem of the unknown customer for years—with one important caveat. The moment someone makes a purchase, certain information becomes known (name, address, payment information, etc.). But

it's important to remember the purchase is deep into a company's relationship with a customer (similar to how deep giving usually occurs in a church's relationship with a guest). Online businesses have developed a long history of building relationships with their customers by giving them an incentive to provide more information.

Some areas of how businesses relate to customers don't need to be replicated by churches. This is one area, particularly in today's unique climate, that churches must employ.

Your first instinct may be to push back. What can churches possibly do to provide incentives for people to become known? Incentives aren't (necessarily) about giving your guests something. *It's about providing value in exchange for information.*

You must constantly be aware of and communicate the value that your follow up provides people. You may decide to offer something to the person who gives you information (a downloadable resource or follow-up gift you'll mail out), but you can also just make clear, each step of the way, that the more your guests become known to you, the better you can serve them.

Develop an Intentional Plan

Follow up doesn't happen by accident. That's true whether you're following up from an in-person service or a virtual one.

An intentional plan means you don't invite people to join you for worship unless you know what you want them to do next. Your goal shouldn't be to just have them join you for your worship service as an anonymous visitor. You can't make disciples with a single visit.

So your first question is, how do you want to disciple those you're reaching online?

Determine your goal

Churches have embraced digital worship services in different ways (with different goals) throughout the years. Some have aimed to move people eventually into an in-person worship service. Others have developed a system of online experiences (small groups, classes, and ministry opportunities) to disciple people they're engaging with. Some have even done a combination of the two.

But today, you don't have a choice. You can't invite your guests to a future in-person worship service—at least not yet.

So you need one goal that you can move all your online guests toward.

Ask yourself this question: *What does a disciple look like in your current online environment?* Think about your church's leaders who are already replicating themselves. What does your church need to do to develop leaders like them?

Be sure to recognize that your goal isn't about your church. It's about the spiritual growth and engagement of people you're reaching. People can tell when your church sees them as just another number. This is even more difficult in a digital environment where you can't meet your guests face to face. [Lovett H. Weems writes on churchleadership.com](#), "Instead of giving people the impression that you would like them to do something for your church, make sure they understand that you want for them the abundant life God wants for them."

Once you have a solid goal in mind, you need a series of next steps that move them toward that goal.

Visualize how you'll reach your goal

You don't need to be an artist or hire an artist to visualize your follow-up process, but it's important to go through the process of drawing up a plan with your team. It will help you ensure everyone is on the same page.

You can get all kinds of digital tools to help you draw out a flow chart, but you don't need to use anything fancy.

Just draw a stick figure on the right side of the flow chart and mark out the different steps needed to move people from worship attendance to your goal.

It might look something like this. Your church discipled people through online small groups. Your goal is to get the person who checked out your worship service to become regular small group attenders. That's on the far right side of your flow chart.

Then mark out the steps needed to get there. Maybe you want to send them a text message right after the service. You want to call them two days later. You'll likely have multiple steps (and it may take multiple weeks to get there).

Make sure your plan is measurable

You measure what you expect to accomplish. Fortunately, measurement becomes easier in the digital world. Just about everything can be measured. But it's important that you set some goals around this measurement.

For example, say you have 1,000 people checking out your livestream. You know 300 of them are regular attenders. Like the example above, you're trying to move people into small groups. You make specific goals for how many people you obtain contact information, how many open emails you sent, and eventually how many new sign ups for small groups happen. Nearly every step can be measured digitally.

Create a multifaceted plan

Follow up is primarily about communication. You're trying to engage guests with information that can help them grow spiritually. We live in an age where there are numerous ways to communicate, and you'll want to employ as many of them as possible in your efforts.

Much of the rest of this ebook focuses on different communications strategies you can employ. Here is a brief overview (although this ebook doesn't reference each of these specifically).

- ▶ **E-mail** Despite all of the challengers that have come along in the last 20 years, e-mail is still the most effective communications vehicle at our disposal. [According to one Pew Research Center Study](#), 3 out of 5 online adults use email every day. You may look at email open rates and question its usefulness, but email allows you to engage a large audience in an automated way and to segment your communications effectively. It's no coincidence that businesses invest a sizable amount of money in email marketing every year.
- ▶ **Texts** While it's more difficult usually to get people to give you a phone number, text messages offer you an immediate connection to a guest.
- ▶ **Social media** Facebook (and other social media platforms) allows you to use an email address to engage people with ads at a later time.

- ▶ **Phone calls** In a time of social distancing, phone calls may have a unique place for people who are particularly lonely right now. It's not always easy to get phone numbers today as people get wary about spam calls, but it could be an important part of your follow-up strategy.
- ▶ **Mobile app** Your mobile app provides your guests with a constant connection to your church body—including a place to watch your service, give, join a small group, find a Bible reading plan, submit a prayer request and more. Because your app provides so many opportunities for engagement, getting your guests to download your app is an important part of your follow-up process.

You'll need to determine the right mix of these follow-up platforms based upon your church and the unique needs of the guests you typically engage. All of them can (and likely will) play some role in your process.

Maximize the Guest Experience Online

If you were hosting a service on your campus this weekend, the follow-up experience for your guests would begin long before those guests arrive at their seats and engage with your worship service.

Think about it a little bit. If guests arrived this weekend, their experience would begin when they drive onto your parking lot and get out of their car. It would continue as they look at your landscaping and check out your building. Then they'd walk through the front doors, and possibly meet a greeter. The experience would continue until they found a seat, flipped through your bulletin, and waited for your service to start.

In a situation like that, there would be a number of places in that process that would impact your ability to follow up on a first-time guest. To more likely ensure a follow-up visit, you'd want to make sure you had a clear parking procedure, friendly greeters, clean facilities, an understandable bulletin and more. You have to provide a good experience if you expect someone to return to your service.

The same is true for your guest's online experience. Their experience begins before they actually open up Facebook Live or open up the streaming player on your website. It begins the moment they start to engage with you. The kind of experience they have when they first visit your website will impact whether they will return. For example, if they struggle to find the service on your website, they may not even worship with you the first time, much less later.

But the online experience continues. Certainly, the preaching and the music play an important role in the likelihood of a return. They may even be the biggest factor.

Fighting for people's attention

You're competing for people's attention. Whether they're watching the service on their television, laptop, phone or on their tablet, they have a multitude of different options they can turn toward. If the service lags, your guests can (and will) switch to something else. Maybe it'll be another worship service from a different church (they can choose any church in the world right now). But that's not the problem (although you have no idea what the other church teaches or how effective they will be at discipling the person).

But your guests can also switch their attention to Netflix, Amazon Prime or a video game. They have at their fingertips a plethora of digital-entertainment options. Your unchurched guest may have come to check you out because they're looking for hope at this unique time and now they're binge-watching their favorite dramatic series because your experience wasn't as user-friendly as they hoped for. That's why it's really important and that you maximize the guest experience. People are depending upon the hope you're sharing.

Keep it simple

You don't need to have all the bells and whistles on your online service to make this happen either. You don't need a Hollywood director to choreograph your service. You simply need to:

- ▶ Make your worship service easy to find.
- ▶ Ensure your audio is clear. If people can't hear you or the sound is muffled, they won't stick around and they won't be back.
- ▶ Take some time to test your lighting so you know people can see the musicians and the teacher well. It's not always easy to distinguish between what your eyes can see and what the camera sees. You may have to experience some trial and error.
- ▶ Clearly communicate that you care about the people you're engaging as people. Don't just sing a few songs and preach sermons. People can find that anywhere. Communicate care and compassion, particularly as the world deals with one of the most unique times in its history.

Your worship service is the first step to a great follow-up experience. *You don't need to wow people; you need to serve them.*

Collect the Right Contact Information

Collecting the right contact information is at the heart of your church's ability to follow up with guests. You can't follow up with anonymous strangers. This isn't much different than in-person worship gatherings. Unless someone gives you their contact information, your church has never been able to follow up on them.

Getting people to provide you with their contact information is a matter of trust. While that's always been true for churches, it's even more true today. As the amount of spam emails and phone calls have grown in recent years, people are reluctant to give out contact information. A few years ago, [Barna Research reported](#) that just a third of Millennials—a key demographic many churches are trying to reach—were comfortable giving their contact information to a church. In fact, the vast majority of Millennials (82 percent) were only comfortable giving a church their first name. If you're trying to reach people with a limited religious background, regardless of their age, they'll be particularly wary of handing over information to you.

Ask for just the information you need

One of the most common mistakes churches make when trying to engage guests online is asking for too much information up front. When a guest is just checking you out, they're often reluctant to give any information. Yes, it would be helpful for your follow-up efforts if you had more contact information, but you risk not getting anything if you ask for too much.

Focus on the information you need. If you can engage the guest further, you'll have an opportunity to get more information. In an online environment, start with an email address. In the early days of online services, some churches tried to require people to log on (and thereby provide their email addresses). That severely limited the reach of the worship service.

Give an incentive for guests to provide contact information

In a sense, when churches required you to log in to get access to their worship service, they were making the service itself the incentive for providing information. Instead of doing that, make access free to all but provide a different incentive for giving you an email address.

Elevation Church does a great job of this. If you visit their [online services](#), you'll see a button on the page offering a free journal and an Elevation pen for anyone who provides contact information. They ask for more information than simply just an email address, but they're also providing a significant return for the value of that information.

If you have something like these “gifts” you can offer for providing information, a similar strategy would be ideal. Look around your church office and see if you have some church pens or other similar church “swag.” If you’ve created any resources as a church, digitize them and offer them as a free download.

You don’t need to offer anything tangible to provide an incentive though. Be open and clear about the value you can provide to guests if you’re able to connect with them further. Let them know about the services you offer and the opportunities for connection (which are at a premium during the COVID-19 crisis) your church can provide if you can contact them. The more value you can provide (either through gifts or a description of the intrinsic value of your follow-up), the more people will likely respond.

The uniqueness of Facebook Live

Your platform will help determine the contact information you collect and how you use it. If you’re using Facebook Live to connect with people, you’ll be able to re-engage your guests with ads based on who engages with your video.

It’s vitally important to your follow-up efforts on a Facebook Live service that you encourage engagement during your service. The best way to do this is to explicitly ask people to comment or ask questions during this time. Have someone from your staff (or a volunteer) respond to the comments. If you can figure out a way to be more interactive in your teaching on Facebook Live, you’ll likely increase engagement and your potential for later follow up.

Develop An Email Strategy

Email is a critical part of any online strategy because (like mentioned earlier in this ebook) it's used so often by the people you're trying to reach. It's critical though that you not just send thoughtless emails with the hopes they accidentally help you connect with your guests. You must be strategic.

Create “guest-focused,” helpful emails

Your guests likely receive an overwhelming amount of “junk” email every day. Most of it they just delete. They will delete yours, too, if your email is not helpful. Your goal for your email is to serve your readers. You will reach your goals if you help your guests reach theirs.

Work to develop a series of short “nurture” emails that drive people to engage with your church as you meet their needs. Ask yourself these two questions, “What do the people in our community need right now? Which of these needs are my church uniquely able to meet?”

You may be tempted to answer the first question spiritually. You know your community needs a relationship with God. Your church obviously has a unique ability to meet that need, but it's not first on the mind of your community—at least the ones you most want to reach.

As we struggle together through this COVID-19 pandemic, certain community needs will become obvious for churches.

- ▶ **Our communities need connection.** Many people are longing to gather with others online. If you can offer interactive small groups online, your emails can invite them to participate.
- ▶ **Our communities need purpose.** With many people out of work, people are hungry for opportunities to contribute even if they can't get paid for it. If you can provide people with ways they can impact the community during this time, an email introducing them to opportunities will be welcomed.
- ▶ **Our communities need resources.** Some of your churches have established clothing, feeding, and employment ministries that are of particular significance with the acute financial situation we're in at the moment. If so, send an email letting people know about these resources. Even if your church doesn't have an opportunity to distribute these resources directly, you should be able to point to other community resources.

Right now you can develop three to four emails pointing out opportunities like these and then automate delivery of those emails after a person provides an email address.

After three emails focused on needs like the ones described above, offer these guests opportunities for further connection to your church body. If you're going to host an online membership class, you might include that here. Just remember, you still need to keep this email focused on the needs of your guests, not your church.

Make it easy to opt out

When people give you contact information, like email addresses, it's based on trust. Part of that trust is that they will be able to get off your list, if it's no longer something helpful. Frankly, you have no reason to add people to your list who don't want to be on it. You won't get any bonus points for an unusable list. Make it clear on each email how people can unsubscribe.

Send emails for a finite period

When you send a guest the first email, let them know how many emails you're sending them and be faithful to remove them from the list after that point. Again, treat this list as an item of stewardship. Your guests will appreciate your consideration, plus if they know how many emails to expect, they are more likely to await each one with more anticipation.

Include a call to action in every email

A call to action is the part of your email where you ask your guests to do something with the information you've given them. Maybe it's to visit a website. Maybe it's to sign up for a small group. Maybe it's a request for more information on the resources you're recommending to them. Your call-to-actions allow your guests to do something with what you've told them. (Most people won't do anything with your information unless you explicitly ask them to do it.) Plus, calls to action allow you to effectively track the response to your emails.

Employ Social Media for Maximum Impact

Your church is likely already engaging social media to help you reach people and connect with your church members. Like many other digital forms of communication, it's even more important in these days of isolation we're currently living. *The New York Times* reported on March 24, that Facebook usage had skyrocketed as people were now using it as an even more significant part of their social interaction. Your community was likely heavily using social media before this period. More of them are using it for longer periods of time now. They are a captive audience to your social media ads right now.

For many churches who are going "all in" on Facebook Live, following up with valuable social media ads is critically important because it's the most natural way to respond to guests. But even people who access your service through a livestream on your website (as long as they've provided you with contact information) can be followed up through Facebook ads.

Using Facebook to follow up

Facebook ads continue to be one of the most cost-effective ways to reach any audience. Your community is not an exception to this rule. Facebook allows you to target your ads to those who have previously engaged (either through Facebook Live or by providing an email address) in order to tailor your ad toward an already warm audience. You can also create different ads based upon where a person lives, their stage of life, their interests, etc.

Davina Adcock [wrote an article for Pushpay's blog](#) that gives a nice overview of Facebook ads for churches if you've not delved into this yet.

You can even follow up with Facebook ads based upon where people have visited on your site. So if you have some places on your website built around specific needs (like online small groups, community needs, service opportunities, etc.), you can share ads that encourage people to respond to what you're offering. It's another way to target your ads towards a need that you know exists and offers a gentle reminder.

The anatomy of a good follow-up ad

Good follow up ads must get a guest's attention. People may not spend much time scanning the ad (even if they did spend time with you on Sunday). By far the best way to get a person's attention is through an image. Don't do a bait-and-switch. Find an image that will make someone stop and take notice and make sure it relates to your invitation.

Another approach is to use a short video invitation from your pastor to take whatever follow-up action you're asking for. In today's environment where few people are

working outside of the house, people tend to have more time to engage with video ads. Plus, if they're familiar with your pastor from the weekend service, they hopefully will have a sense of connection with the ad.

As for the copy itself, it's good to test different lengths. Usually the less familiar a person is with your church, the more copy you'll need (because they'll need more convincing to click on your call to action). You're following up on people who are somewhat warm because they've watched your church online. If you're targeting people who have watched a significant amount of your worship service, you know you've likely hit a chord with the topic. Build on that if possible in the ad.

Also, make sure you have a clear next step defined in your call to action that is consistent with the goals for your follow-up strategy.

Use Your Mobile App to Close the Deal

No one likely needs to tell you how influential the smartphone has become in the last decade. The average person spends four to five hours a day (depending upon your source) on their smartphone. It's become so essential to how people live today that the [U.S. federal government provides](#) funding for many in poverty to obtain free (or nearly free) smart phones so they can stay connected with healthcare and job needs. Nearly everyone you want to engage has a smartphone.

How to get new guests to download your mobile app

The challenge in using your mobile app to follow up with guests is that they need to download the app first. Your church's mobile app can be the new hub of your ministry. Since at least the fourth century, the building has been the ministry hub of the church. You couldn't minister to people (or with people) unless they walked through the church doors—or maybe met you somewhere.

But today—particularly with corporate gatherings on pause—people hold the church hub in their purse and pocket. Nearly any aspect of the church's engagement can happen through that mobile device.

Be clear with your guests that your mobile app is the best way to stay up to date with what's going on in your church. That's where they can connect with you for prayer. That's where they can find small groups. That's where they can find helpful devotionals and other content.

The more you use your church's mobile app the bigger incentive they have to download it.

Mobile app producers like [Pushpay](#) make it even easier to onboard guests with your mobile app. Through Pushpay, if someone gives on your website, they'll automatically get an email suggesting they download your app. You also can share a special keyword that a guest can text to 77977, and they'll be sent a link to download the app.

How to use your mobile app to engage guests

Like mentioned earlier, your mobile app gives your guests access to all areas of your church's ministry. Specifically, you can use it to connect to guests in the following ways.

- 1. Find a small group.** You can publish your small group directory right in the app so your guests can discover and connect with new communities instantly.
- 2. Submit a prayer request.** New people to the church may not really know how they can get prayer for needs in their lives. Point people to your mobile app where you can include a simple form where people can send in requests that you can pass on to the prayer warriors in your church.

3. **Provide a Bible reading plan.** One of the most important first steps for new people to your church community is to engage them in regular Bible reading. An app can be a great repository of Bible reading plans that can give people a simple, systematized way to read scripture.
4. **Help people give.** A mobile app provides an easy place for people to give in a manner that most people today are familiar with. But a mobile app can also [start people on a giving journey](#) where they start out as first-time givers and eventually become regular, generous givers.
5. **Update your content regularly.** The more often you update the content on your mobile app (with news, videos, social media posts, etc.) the more often people will use it.

If you want help developing a mobile app that nurtures your guest experience, talk with one of Pushpay's mobile experts and get a demonstration of how the platform can work for your ministry.

Leaning into the New Normal

Nothing about the recent weeks have been normal for churches. Since at least the fourth century A.D., the church has primarily gathered around buildings. We've told people that the church isn't the building. We've encouraged our people to minister where they are at. We've gone online and taken the message of Christ to places it has never been. Yet in the middle of all of that, we've largely been a building-centered faith.

That stopped in March of 2020.

The church has been slowly moving to digital over the last two decades. In one month, we took a giant leap forward.

It's not forever. One day, we'll head back to our buildings. We'll hug and be hugged again. We'll worship together. We'll study the scriptures together. We'll work to the betterment of our community together.

The church will always gather, but when we move back to "normal" our communities likely won't be looking for business as usual. Humanity has never experienced anything quite like this *together*. Previous global pandemics came before the advent of modern communications. We've experienced the COVID-19 crisis together in a way the world never has before.

More than likely the shift the world's economy has headed toward for the last three decades (or more) will accelerate. At least some of the people who have grown accustomed to buying groceries and toilet paper (when it can be found) online, aren't going to return to department stores. For a century, we've gathered at movie theaters to watch the latest Hollywood creation. Some will still do that after this period recedes. Many will discover that streaming their favorite movie on their big screen television in the comfort of their home, with their favorite snacks is a much better alternative.

Then, there is the church. Gatherings must always be a part of the Christian faith. But even before we encountered the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of people who were engaging the church digitally was climbing. This will continue when all of our restrictions are lifted.

What if your church decided that the online church model wasn't just a novelty—but a strategic way to reach and disciple people?

What if online engagement became the new normal?

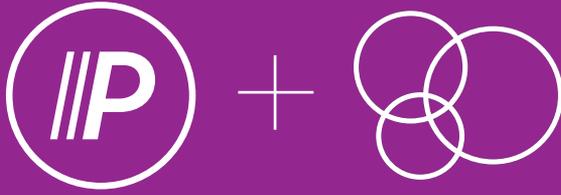
The strategies and opportunities won't go away when this crisis ends.

It's time we all lean into the new normal.

Let us help equip your church to grow.

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