

ADULT BIBLE STUDY..... Next week (January 10 at 10 am) we are beginning a new Adult Bible Study series on Max Lucado's book, "Anxious for Nothing." You won't need the book to follow along with the 6 week study, but you certainly can order it. The study will include a video presentation and discussion.

This week (Sunday, January 3 at 9:30 am) we will discuss a Wired Word topic. I'd like to hear your opinion on this. Read and be ready to discuss! Here is the Zoom link for the online study on Sunday:

[WELCOME](#)

Some Congregations Are 'Zoomed Out' on Virtual Worship

[In the News](#)

"We are now Zoomed out."

That's how the Rev. Jerry Smith, rector of Holy Comforter Episcopal Church in Tallahassee, Florida, explained his congregation's feelings about virtual worship conducted online using the cloud platform for video and audio conferencing known as Zoom or using similar applications.

That feeling was behind Smith's church's decision to hold their recent Christmas Eve service in the church's parking lot as a drive-in service with the liturgy transmitted via FM radio instead of only streaming it online or holding it indoors with strict limits on how many could attend.

While gathering in their cars is not the same as gathering in pews, it's better than settling for a streaming service, Smith said. "We don't want to sit in front of the TV screen anymore. It's not the same as being in each other's presence," he said.

Throughout the pandemic, Holy Comforter has followed the guidance of the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, strictly limiting attendance at indoor services, but that has meant that not everyone connected to that congregation has the opportunity to see other congregants face to face.

While many churches have adopted virtual worship and other means to maintain social distance during these infectious times, none of those fully compensate for Christian worship as an in-person, side-by-side experience.

But does that matter to the average worshiper? According to a Pew Research Center survey conducted in mid-July, nine out of 10 Americans who have watched services online or on TV in the past month said they are either "very" satisfied (54 percent) or "somewhat" satisfied (37 percent) with the experience. Only 8 percent said they were "not too" or "not at all" satisfied with worship in those formats.

Of course, that survey was conducted while livestreaming local church worship was still a relatively new thing, and as Smith indicated, by now, some people are "Zoomed out." Thus, if the Pew survey were conducted today, the results may have been different, though we can only guess whether fewer or more people would favor virtual worship.

Still, many church leaders are concerned about the long-term effects of relying on online services. Will people return when restrictions are lifted? Or will they prefer to take part online?

Whatever the answers to those questions, the major concern is not about whether churches will retain enough in-person parishioners to keep their doors open, but that, as the Rev. Laura Everett, executive director of the Massachusetts Council of Churches, put it, Christianity is not just a set of ideas, but also a set of practices and relationships, many of which have been muted or changed by the pandemic.

Everett said that the past nine months have been the longest she has been absent from a church since she had a conversion experience as an eighth-grader. And others who have been regular attenders can no doubt say something similar.

Everett said she misses the chaos and the mess of worship services but particularly the common, small acts of grace that come from in-person connection: putting her hand on someone, for instance, who has been sick, and praying for their healing.

"I have missed that echo of voices when we say the Lord's Prayer, those well-worn words where my voice will drop out sometimes because I am so tired or so sad and other people carry the prayer for me," she said.

"I know that can happen on Zoom and it does. But I miss sitting next to them," she adds.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Why Christianity Remains an In-Person Religion, Even in a Pandemic. Religion News Service](#)
[Will the Coronavirus Permanently Convert In-Person Worshipers to Online Streamers? They Don't Think So. Pew Research Center](#)

Applying the News Story

While we at *The Wired Word* believe that in-person worship is generally the best arrangement, nothing said in this lesson is to minimize the power and effectiveness of online, on-air or other forms of worship that maintain social distance. And we commend the pastors and congregations that have tried new ways to conduct worship throughout this pandemic. We also expect that once the bans on gathering are no longer needed, some of the new worship platforms will continue as worthwhile supplements to in-person worship.

We also recognize certain strengths in social-distance types of worship. In fact, some people have found that online worship shows them that we are "members one of another" across a much greater distance and a bigger "body" than we may have previously recognized. For instance, one TWW team member tells us, "I have been worshipping with a church in Maryland, though my local congregation is several states away. I also do Bible study and some other activities with the Maryland church because they offer opportunities my local church does not. So I have recognized and experienced the gifts of those far-flung members of Christ's church as well, and they and I have become connected in ways that would not have happened if church participation were only in person."

But there is much to commend in-person worship, and that is our subject in this lesson.

The Big Questions

1. Now that you have experienced online worship (or some other social-distance kind of worship), are you more or less likely to return to in-person worship once the pandemic is over? Why?

2. To what degree is living a Christian life an individual endeavor? To what degree is it a congregational endeavor? Do you agree that Christianity is not just a set of ideas, but also a set of practices and relationships? Why or why not?

3. What specific things do you receive from the in-person fellowship of your congregation? Which of these has been in short supply since the social-distancing restrictions have limited church gatherings?

4. "Passing the peace" is a common practice in many churches where, at a specified point in the worship service, congregants leave their seats and intermingle, shaking hands or hugging and greeting one another in the name of Christ or saying "Peace be with you" or something similar. Given the amount of physical contact and lack of social distancing involved, do you think passing the peace should be permanently eliminated from worship services once the pandemic is over? Why or why not?

5. When online worship is the only option available, what can you do by way of preparation at home to receive the most from the service?

CLOSING