

# A Guide for Building and Sustaining Digital Community

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For nearly six months, we've gathered as church, dispersed by the pandemic. Out of necessity we have flexed new muscles and learned what it means to live, and perhaps even to thrive at times, on digital platforms. The pandemic will have forever changed the landscape for faith communities. During this time, some of us will have reached people who otherwise would not have crossed the threshold of a Church, and perhaps never will.

Harvesting our learnings and seeking to sharpen them further, while holding fast to what makes us Church, will serve us well as we seek to create and sustain community on digital platforms. This guide leans into that work. We recognize that churches are engaged with this work online in different places. We urge you to read on and engage critically, add your own learnings to the mix, and stretch yourself into new spaces. If you have additional insights to share, please reach out to the Rev. Jenifer Gamber, Special Missioner for the School for Christian Faith and Leadership. We seek to live into this new age, learning for the sake of spreading gospel. We will be stronger together.

We begin with our humanity and what people seek, knowing that we are made in God's image, however imperfectly we might express that image. In a June 2020 [Leading Ideas](#) article, Heidi A. Campbell, editor of [The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online](#), identified [Six Traits People Value in Online Faith Communities](#):

1. Relationships
2. Support and encouragement
3. A sense of being appreciated
4. Trusted connections
5. A safe place for intimate communication
6. Share beliefs and purpose

Communities of faith share these values. Indeed, we aspire to be places of relationship gathered around shared belief and purposes. Jesus modeled the gathering of people into authentic relationships of mutual care when he called his disciples to the loving, life-giving, liberating work of proclaiming the coming of the kingdom of God. When considering how to build



community online and move people from viewers to participants, let these six core traits be your guide.

## Build on Existing Ministries and Translate

How might we create a stronger sense of community where people know themselves as valued, connected and cared for? We recommend you start where you are. Build on the muscles you have for creating community: (1) name what your community does well and translate those ministries into the digital sphere then by (2) look to see what new possibilities are opened by the digital age. Just as connecting digitally raises barriers for some, it reduces barriers for others.

Using the table below, begin by listing the ministries of your congregation that build relationships; support and encourage others; cultivate trusted connections; and offer spaces for safe conversation and shared beliefs and purpose. List those ministries in Column 1. In column 2 list the value that drives that ministry. What does that ministry hope to achieve? Now, covering the specific ministry, look only at the values. What new ministries would express those values in the digital sphere? (We've begun the list to provide examples.)

Ministries	Values	Digital Expression
Ushers	Welcome to worship, orient newcomers.	Digital worship hosts who post welcome in the chat or Facebook feed
Small group	Deepening relationship, learning	Zoom gatherings
Foyer group	Fellowship, relationship	

Your next step is to consider how the digital sphere expands your ministry opportunities. What barriers does meeting online lower or remove? Here are some questions to guide you.

1. What ways might technology connect people across generations? *[Examples might be connecting an elder with a family with children, inviting the elder to read a storybook to the children. Or go "old school" and establish pen pals. Children and adults alike love to get mail. I remember our daily family ritual of walking to the mailbox to see what handwritten notes awaited us. Or, if an elder lives alone, invite them to a virtual dinner.]*



2. What ways might technology connect your congregation with the larger neighborhood? [*Sometimes crossing the threshold of a church is a barrier to a visitor. Meeting online removes that barrier. What book might your congregation read and host a community read? What's going on outside your church doors that might make a good topic for a community-wide discussion? Consider hosting such a conversation online and post an invitation on a community listserv.*]

3. How might technology amplify the Sunday sermon? [*The digital sphere offers new opportunities to repurpose your Sunday message. With Canva, create FB and Instagram memes that feature a phrase or image from the sermon during the week. Do videotape your sermon? Cut it into bite-sized 3 to 6-minute pieces and launch over a period of days with the invitation to connect with the rector for more conversation.*]

## Specific Suggestions for Building Relationships

Here are some proven practices for building relationships both within your community and with your neighbors that have been gathered from conversations across faith communities:

### Create Digital Hosts

Gather a team of digital hosts who will greet people by name, whether on Facebook or Zoom as they join your worshipping community. Members of your usher, flower, or altar guild may be seeking ministries that engage their desire to contribute in liturgy. (See the end of this document for more about teams.)

### Invite Conversation

The chat box in Zoom and the activity feed on Facebook are natural ways for people to connect, but with the common custom of not chatting during worship, people might need to be encouraged to use the chat generously throughout worship as a way to engage and connect.

### Establish Small Groups

Joining a small group used to be an insider-activity. Today, the barrier to joining small groups has lowered. Consider creating an entry-point small group that relates to the concerns of your surrounding area and posting an invitation to join on your congregation's landing page. For instance, one of our congregations is hosting a community-read of an anti-racism book with a majority of members outside the congregation.

### Offer a Digital Connect Card

Create a digital connect card using Google forms. Never heard of such a thing? A digital connect card is simply a visit card for the digital world. Post a link to your digital connect card in the chat, on the YouTube notes and on Facebook with specific invitations to fill one out. [Here's an example.](#)



### **Host Casual Conversations**

Remember, people are seeking a place of belonging and relationship. During worship, be prepared to offer specific opportunities for people to connect with your community for information conversation. Do you have a group of people who meet for coffee every week or a few times a month on Zoom or at an outdoor venue while maintaining safe distancing? Do you have people in your community who are open to reaching out to visitors for a casual conversation?

### **Use the Chat in the FB Feed or Zoom Chat**

During announcements, empower your digital ministry team to share links to events and opportunities mentioned during the announcements. Invite participants to use the chat during the prayers of the people and read those prayers aloud.

### **Consider Singing and Reflecting**

Music is a vital part of many communities' expression of music. Some people, however, find it awkward to sing alone at home. As you begin your online worship, acknowledge this awkwardness and invite people to sing anyway. Let them know they're not alone. Alternatively, give people an opportunity to engage in another way with the music by offering a question prompt related to the lyrics.

### **Create and Share Videos of Your Community in Action**

The growing ubiquity of cellphones and computers has made creating videos easier than ever. Create a prompting question and invite your community to upload their answers in video form into a Google drive. Use these videos to create a collage of stories and repost on social media or show on Sunday morning. Remember, people seek to be part of a community that shares purpose and meaning. And for a congregation, that purpose is to be a blessing to God, one another, and the world. Consider a prompting question related to living the Baptismal Promises.

### **Connect, Connect, Connect**

During the offertory invite people to stay in touch during the week by directing them to your FB or IG accounts. Some congregations follow up their Sunday message on FB and IG with mid-week check-ins related to the call-to-action from their sermon. Engaging with people M-F in the spaces they inhabit such as Facebook or Instagram let them know that you care and that God is with them in those spaces too.

### **Enhance Pre-Worship Narthex Small-Talk**

If you worship by Zoom replicate small talk in the narthex before worship by sending people into zoom breakout rooms for 5 minutes at a time. Offer a question prompt to get the conversation started. The congregation of St. Lydia's in Brooklyn, who regularly welcomes visitors, practices this type of hospitality.



### **Enhance Post-Worship Coffeehour**

If you worship by Zoom replicate coffeehour, again with a round robin of breakout sessions with 5-6 people in each room at a time. It's amazing how people are getting to know one another in new ways! If you stream worship, consider hosting a zoom coffee-hour after the streamed worship.

### **Follow Up**

Write the name so your guests who attend worship--whether on Facebook or Zoom-- and consider reaching out to them during the week. Thank them for visiting and ask if they have any questions. If they return, welcome them by name. A basic human need is to know and be known. Now, we realize this may be a time-consuming task. Depending on your size, be sure to take the time to build a hospitality team. Equip and empower them to reach out to visitors.

## **Capacity and Building Teams**

With any new endeavor, building capacity takes time and intention. Don't think you have to do it all at once. Rather, take small, doable next steps. And expect to fail. Toddlers, when they begin to walk, fall. This is an important part of learning. So try, fail, reflect, learn and try a new iteration. Eventually you will find the practices that fit your context well. Give yourself and your congregation plenty of time to learn new muscles.

Many of the suggestions above will work best with a team. Begin, then, by building your team. Map out the tasks to be done and chunk out the work into bit-sized pieces. In the case of a Sunday morning digital ministry team, assign one person to mute and unmute participants, another to post links during announcements, and still another to issue a welcome and generate conversation in the chat box. Often ministry is built on an inverted-triangle model where the weight of responsibility rests on one or two people. Inverted triangles tend to topple over. Instead, think in terms of a triangle resting on a large base of people who together sustain the ministries of your congregation. Such a model doesn't depend on the success of a single person, but the collaboration of many. Fortunately, our digitally-shaped culture, with the capacity for shared documents and platforms that facilitate wide participation, supports a collaborative approach to ministry.

Ryan Panzer, author of upcoming book, *Grace and Gigabytes*, suggests a pragmatic approach that he calls *digital minimalism*. Because our culture is increasingly shaped by digital technology and the mission of the Church is enacted within culture, how we do church must take technology into account. We are called to ministry at the intersection of the church's mission and tech-shaped culture, and prioritize those technologies that align with your congregation's vision and the broader culture. Keep in mind: technology should serve the mission of the church.

