

Virtual church on a snow day

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Like many churches in the path of the East Coast winter storm, my congregation cancelled worship two Sundays ago. We didn't get record-breaking amounts of snow, but here in North Carolina it doesn't take much to shut us down.

It felt weird, though, not to have church at all. So on a whim I threw out a request to the parishioners I'm connected to on Facebook: would they meet up at our normal worship time for a virtual service at our church's page? Sure, they said, absolutely.

So on Sunday morning, in my pajamas and with coffee in hand, I sat down at my computer and led worship. I was slightly concerned that this was a ridiculous idea that would result in a giant train wreck forever archived in the eternal memory of cyberspace.

I was wrong. It was awesome.

I know there are higher-tech and more effective ways to host a virtual worship service, but Facebook was quick and easy, and it worked for us. I created an event on our page and invited my church friends to join in. I shared it on my own timeline,

too, knowing that there were plenty of other people snowed in. Before we started, I wrote out all the posts I planned to use. It wasn't all that different from writing liturgy, and writing them ahead of time meant I didn't have to write them on the fly, though I did improvise a bit as I went.

I also recorded two short videos in advance, a welcome and a closing benediction. Videos are tricky on Facebook—they take a bit to load. So if you do this, keep your videos to 20 seconds or so. (Or upload longer videos elsewhere and embed them. This would take more planning ahead and savvy than I was up for on a snow-day morning.) The scripture reading was done by video as well; a friend recorded her daughter reading a few verses of the psalm and sent it to me to post.

The rest of the service was text and photos. I would post a prompt and invite responses in the comments. After being stuck at home for days, people were eager to share their pictures of playing in the snow and to tell us what they'd been watching on Netflix. The invitation to prayer got the biggest response, as people prayed for the sick and hurting, gave thanks for the unexpected pause the snow had given them, and lifted gratitude for emergency crews working through the storm.

Once we got started, it was hard to keep up with the ongoing conversations. A quirk of Facebook is that posts with new comments get automatically bumped to the top of the page. (There may well be a way around this. Facebook settings have always been a bit of a mystery to me.) The effect was that the items were never quite in the order I intended. While I was posting an offering invitation—I linked to our online giving page, as well as to an organization in town that was hosting overnight warming centers—the prayer thread kept popping back up to the top of the page.

This wasn't bad, but it did take some getting used to. This was no quiet, contemplative service; this was worship-as-coffee-hour, with several conversations going at once. The service took on a life of its own in a way that worship in our sanctuary rarely does. When I posted my last video and said goodbye, several people added their comments, turning it into a communal blessing and benediction.

There were plenty of holy moments. Two of our beloved members, serving with the military far from home, commented on the prayer thread and were met with welcomes as joyous as if they'd walked into the sanctuary unannounced. A man in his mid-80s—who I'm pretty sure had never been on Facebook before—chimed in to say he and his wife were rejoicing with us. And there was something particularly

delightful about the psalm proclaimed in the sweet voice of a seven-year-old wearing purple pajamas.

I still think that worship is better together, in the same physical space, where we can look each other in the eye. We're Disciples, with table-centered worship, but I didn't attempt anything like communion. That's an in-the-flesh experience that doesn't quite translate online.

Still, I think more than 50 people participated. If we'd trekked through the snow to the church building that morning, we'd have been lucky to have 10.

So the community gathered, from far and wide. We heard the word and offered up our prayers and our praise. It was awkward and a little bit messy; unpredictable, complicated, and holy. It was church.