

The gifts of small church during a pandemic

Our Sunday Zoom service was deeply moving. It was also a little awkward, but we know how to roll with that.

by [Kara Root](#)

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Our little church made a big pivot this past weekend. We held our worship service online (with a phone option) via Zoom.

Initially, when the decision was made by my own congregation and others, I heard a general lament that went something like, “We little churches are not equipped for this like the big ones. They already have livestreaming! They have the technology and the know-how!” I heard a repeated call for big churches to take the lead on this. Big churches generously offered to share links to their services with small churches, and many small churches gratefully accepted.

But we went forward with our own online service. We settled on Zoom because we wanted people to be able to interact, not just watch. After our deeply moving

worship gathering this weekend, I came to the conclusion that we little churches might actually be *better* equipped for this than the big ones.

People are feeling anxious. Those who are not already isolated are going to become isolated, and those for whom loneliness is a regular adversary are going to be battling it more fiercely. People don't just go to church for the sermon or the music. When it comes down to it, people want and need connection.

Church reminds us of our belonging—specifically, it reminds us that we belong to God and that we belong to each other. Both. To see and be seen by others is a vital way we see and feel seen by God.

On Sunday, our little group of approximately 45 people crowded around 26 computers and phones and felt palpably our belonging to God and each other. We were in each other's homes. Dogs attended. Kids held their own screens in the bedroom while their parents joined in from the den.

We didn't have a professional backdrop; we had my fireplace. We didn't have a band; we had someone on a piano in her living room. And we didn't have any expectations that this was going to be spectacular. The acceptance of awkwardness is a gift of small churches; we know how to roll. So instead of professional polish, we had genuine human relationships.

What in advance seemed daunting became just the balm we all needed. I have been receiving emails and texts of gratitude for days from parishioners who loved being together in worship in that way. "That was CHURCH!" one wrote.

In the midst of a very strange time, this way of connecting left us all feeling *connected*. We can't wait for next week. In between, we plan to stop by and help a couple folks set up their computers so they can join in too. And we've broken the congregation into small groups for calling and checking in with each person every week.

Church is who we are. It's not where we go, or what information we take in. Small churches *are* equipped for this. We have the relationships! We are scrappy and flexible, and we know how to roll.

Big churches that are prerecording videos or livestreaming with a pastor and musicians can do other things too, of course. The task right now is to find ways to gather people together online—to make small churches within the bigger one, to

keep people in touch with each other. After they watch church, help them *be* church. Let them see and be seen, so they can remember their belonging to God and each other.