Opinion | Why Churches Should Drop Their Online Services

Tish Harrison Warren

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Credit: By Matija Medved

Tish Harrison Warren

Opinion Writer

Over the past two years a refrain has become common in churches and other religious communities: “Join us in person or online.” I was a big proponent of that “or online” part. In March of 2020, we knew little about the new disease spreading rapidly around the world but we knew it was deadly,

especially for the elderly. My church was one of the first in our city to forgo meeting in person and switch to an online format, and I encouraged other churches to do the same.

Since then Sunday mornings have varied. Our church met online; then met indoors with limited attendance, masks and social distancing; then met outdoors; then, after vaccines, indoors again. Precautions rose and fell according to our city's threat level. But even as most churches now offer in-person services, the "or online" option has remained. I think this is good, given how unusual the past two years have been.

Now I think it's time to drop the virtual option. And I think this for the same reason I believed churches should go online back in March 2020: This is the way to love God and our neighbors.

For all of us — even those who aren't churchgoers — bodies, with all the risk, danger, limits, mortality and vulnerability that they bring, are part of our deepest humanity, not obstacles to be transcended through digitization. They are humble (and humbling) gifts to be embraced. Online church, while it was necessary for a season, diminishes worship and us as people. We seek to worship wholly — with heart, soul, mind and strength — and embodiment is an irreducible part of that wholeness.

We are not in 2020 anymore. Even for vulnerable groups such as those over age 65, Covid has a roughly similar risk of death as the flu for those who are fully vaccinated, and the Omicron variant seems to pose even less risk than the flu. A recent C.D.C. study found those who are fully vaccinated are 90 percent less likely to be hospitalized because of Covid-19 than those who are not. Certainly, the Omicron variant brought a surge in cases and hospitalization that has threatened to overwhelm hospitals in certain regions, but it appears that Omicron is waning.

There is still risk, of course, but the goal was never — and ought never be — to eliminate all risk of illness or death. Throughout the past two years, we have sought to balance the risk of disease with the good of being present, in person, with one another. And the cost of being apart from one another is steep. People need physical touch and interaction. We need to connect with other human beings through our bodies, through the ordinary vulnerability of looking into their eyes, hearing their voice, sharing their space, their smells, their presence.

Whether or not one attends religious services, people need embodied community. We find it in book clubs or having friends over for dinner. But embodiment is a particularly important part of Christian spirituality and theology. We believe God became flesh, lived in a human body and remains mysteriously in a human body. Our worship is centered not on simply thinking about certain ideas, but on eating and drinking bread and wine during communion.

"Christians need to hear the babies crying in church. They need to see the reddened eyes of a friend across the aisle," Collin Hansen wrote in his Times essay about online church. "They need to chat with the recovering drug addict who shows up early but still sits in the back row. They need to taste the bread and wine. They need to feel the choir crescendo toward the assurance of hope in what our senses can't yet perceive."

These are not mere accessories to a certain kind of worship experience. These moments form and shape who we are and what we believe.

One might ask, why not have both? Why not meet in person (with Covid precautions in place) but also continue to offer the option of a live-streamed service? Because offering church online implicitly makes embodiment elective. It presents in-person gatherings as something we can opt in or out of with little consequence. It assumes that embodiment is more of a consumer preference, like whether or not you buy hardwood floors, than a necessity, like whether or not you have shelter.

Throughout the pandemic, everyone has had to evaluate what is and isn't essential. We as a society have had to ask whether in-person church attendance is more like going to a restaurant or more like elementary school education — whether it's something that is a nice perk in life or something that is indispensable. There was a time, of course, at the beginning of the pandemic, when, like churches, schools went entirely online. But around the globe, experts believe that the costs of school closures currently outweigh the risks of Covid-19. In Christian theology and practice, physically gathering as a church should be seen as similarly essential and irreplaceable.

There are some brass-tack realities of phasing out an online meeting option. First, church leaders should conform to local government protocols and strongly encourage members to be fully vaccinated.

Second, no longer offering a streaming option will unfortunately mean that those who are homebound or sick will not be able to participate in a service. This, however, is not a new problem for the church. For centuries, churches have handled this inevitability by visiting these people at home in person. A small team of "lay eucharistic ministers" at our former church volunteered to go to the home of anyone who could not make it to church and wanted a visit. They would meet one-on-one with people, caring for them, reciting a short liturgy together, serving communion and catching up. This asks more from a congregation in terms of time and commitment than streaming a service online. It requires volunteers who are trustworthy and trained. But it gives the gifts of personal, embodied presence, and even friendship and love.

Last, many church leaders will need to face our real fear of appearing to not take Covid seriously enough. I still think the biggest religion story of 2020 was how across the nation, religious communities of all faiths and ideologies pivoted almost overnight to move church online in an effort to love those around us. By April of 2020, the Protestant research group Lifeway found that only 1 percent of churches with more than 200 members met in person (and only 4 percent to 7 percent of Protestant churches of any size). Still, what dominated the headlines during this time seemed to be every conservative, Covid-denying pastor who insisted on holding superspreader events.

For those of us religious folks who have taken the pandemic seriously, there is residual shame around this. It was embarrassing for people to use the language of God to endanger lives. We don't want to appear to be one of these kinds of religious people, so we can be hesitant about phasing out any precaution. But this ought not lead churches to, as The Times's David Leonhardt wrote regarding Covid and childhood education, try "to minimize the spread of Covid — a worthy goal absent other factors

— rather than minimizing the damage that Covid does to society." It's time to begin to relinquish our online habits and the isolation they produce.

About four years ago, my family had a group of people from our church in their early 20s over to our house. We shared a meal and we asked them what hopes and challenges our church offered to their generation. Their answers surprised me. Over and over, they said, one of the hardest and best things about church was that they had to sit with people of different ages, classes and political beliefs. It was a practice they found inconvenient, yes, but truly grounding, nourishing and good.

Throughout history, the mere fact of meeting together in person to sit, sing and talk to others was never all that countercultural. Being physically present to others was the default mode of existence. But for these digital natives, the stubborn analog wonders of skin, handshakes, hugs, bread and wine, faces, names and spontaneous conversation is part of what intrigued them and kept them going to church.

A chief thing that the church has to offer the world now is to remind us all how to be human creatures, with all the embodiment and physical limits that implies. We need to embrace that countercultural call.

Have feedback? Send a note to HarrisonWarren-newsletter@nytimes.com.

Tish Harrison Warren (@Tish_H_Warren) is a priest in the Anglican Church in North America and author of "Prayer in the Night: For Those Who Work or Watch or Weep."