Online church: Ministries use VR, apps to deliver digital services and virtual baptisms

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Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Instead of ceremoniously sitting in a sanctuary on Easter Sunday like millions of Americans, dozens of experience-driven parishioners from all around the world took a walk into Jesus' tomb, peering at the massive stone that once blocked the entrance before taking a tour of the cross where their savior was crucified.

No plane tickets to Jerusalem required. All they needed was an internet connection and a VR headset.

This is a radical change from how many experienced church as kids.

"When I grew up, there was no such thing as tech in church. You weren't allowed to text, you weren't allowed to take videos, you weren't even allowed to have a phone," said Lasha Hubbard, 26, who attends New Direction Baptist Church in Nashville.

"If it wasn't in the book—meaning the hardcopy Bible—you couldn't use it. Today, everywhere you turn, there's someone using an app or looking up at a screen."

As churches across the nation install giant screens in the sanctuary and professional-grade cameras to live stream services, others are embracing technology on a whole new level.

Some perform digital baptisms where avatars are immersed in pools of water-colored pixels. More exist entirely online with no geographical footprint, while others recruit coders to develop apps to enhance Sunday service.

Virtual Reality

"We are leaving the information age and entering the experience age of VR (virtual reality) and AR (augmented reality)," said D.J. Soto, pastor of VR Church, which he says is one of the first fully computer-generated religious institutions.

One week, churchgoing avatars attended service on top of a skyscraper that's hovering in the clouds. By the next week, they could be teleported into a grassy field with a Dubai-like skyline in the background.

Roughly 150 people attend each week.

"Our sermons are less stage-delivered," Soto said. "They're more engaging. We want people to really experience the scripture, so I'll have everyone follow me as we go through the story."

To attend the church, congregants with virtual reality headsets use AltspaceVR, a social media platform that provides digital meeting spaces for avatars. On AltspaceVR, there's a calendar that lists events you can attend such as computer-generated comedy nights and cyber open-mic nights. The events list is home to Soto's VR church.

Soto set out to create a "radically inclusive" worshiping experience after quitting his job at a local megachurch in Reading, Pennsylvania, in 2016. Months later, Soto started the virtual reality congregation.

"There are certain conversations that are tough to have in physical churches," Soto said, "And some people who don't identify with any specific religion may have a hard time finding where they fit in."

Soto's computer-generated church aims to fill that gap.

The digital pastor says the simulated environment is welcoming to people with religious traditions and atheists alike. "Let's have discussions for or against God, and let's be respectful. Everybody is invited to a VR church," Soto said.

Embracing technology and radical inclusivity might help churches like Soto's survive during a time when adults of all ages are leaving religious institutions in record numbers.

Unsurprisingly, millennials are leading the wave.

Just 42% of the connected generation are members of churches, while 62% of Gen X-ers attended church when they were about the same age as millennials, according to a new Gallup poll.

Since 2000, when 70% of Americans went to church, Baby Boomer's attendance dropped by 8%, and Traditionalists (born in 1945 or before) dropped by 9%.

Now, the percentage of Americans who report belonging to a church, synagogue or mosque is at an all-time low—averaging 50% in 2018, Gallup found.

Online Church

While only half of Americans attend church, more than three-quarters (77%) say that they identify with organized religion. So decreasing in-person membership could contribute to an uptick in virtual churchgoing.

"Nowadays, you can really build out your own faith plan without going to church," said Lauren Hunter, who founded ChurchTechToday, an online technology resource for pastors. Hunter noted that people may choose to listen to religious podcasts or watch worship leaders on YouTube instead of attending a physical church.

Live-streaming church services is nothing new, and religious groups have been making recordings of their sermons and selling them ever since cassette tapes were popularized .

But what's different today is some pastors don't preach out of a physical church at all. While not going as far as virtual and augmented reality services, they're fully digital.

"Many churches depended on people walking in, and we're going into a

phase where less people are doing so. Now we have to be more proactive, so we can really amplify what we're about," said Jay Kranda, an online campus pastor at Saddleback Church which is headquartered in Lake Forest, California.

Kranda became an online pastor in 2012, overseeing a weekly crowd of 20,000 people who watch for 30 minutes or more on average.

"In the beginning, a lot of churches thought the internet would hurt and keep people from coming. But it's actually one of the best ways to reach new people," Kranda said. He engages with the congregation through various live-stream services and apps like WhatsApp and Facebook.

Being online cuts down operating costs since you don't have to "book rooms, pay for any platforms, set anything up or tear anything down," Kranda said. He also said that online pastors use data to track which topics resonate with their parishioners based on engagement, views and shares.

One of the most common criticisms of digital churches is that it contributes to a growing isolation epidemic, which is recognized by the medical community as having physical, mental and emotional consequences. So Kranda tries to funnel members of the online congregation to a local church.

"In some ways, I'm responsible for what I'm enabling," Kranda says. "Loneliness is a big issue, and we talk about like that. The fear is that people just watch online and think they're a part of our church."

Solely watching and engaging with church online isn't just a fear. It's a trend.

Some people call themselves "bedside Baptists" and "pillow

Presbyterians," for example, meaning loosely that their spiritual journey may not always require that they attend a physical service.

"Over time, people have sort of shifted their priorities," Hunter said. "Not that church isn't a priority, but in some parts of the country, people are expected to attend Wednesday, Sunday morning and Sunday evening services. That's a lot of commitment."

Apps

That type of perpetual attendance "isn't sustainable in the world we live in today," Hunter said, so parishioners embrace digital technology to "replace all the extra Bible study or mid-week fellowship with live streams and apps."

Churchome Global is another example of where the online digital church may be headed.

The app, which is the brainchild of celebrity pastors Judah and Chelsea Smith, lets users pray for fellow members by pressing their thumbs against prayer emojis as rotating hearts float from the bottom of the screen.

The Churchome Global app is billed as "a new way to church" as congregants are encouraged to post, share and attend digital events. It's like a social networking app for Christians.

Churchome says the app was created to engage people who wouldn't otherwise go to church. It's also home to several people who are looking to fellowship with "like-minded spiritual people" in their area.

"Instead of having to invest in large churches or auditoriums that sit empty most of the week, we're trying to get people to come together,"

said Pastor Mark Venti, executive pastor of central ministries at Churchome.

"We're building out features and location-based services that allow people to have viewing parties. So you can invite everyone within 45 minutes of you and Airplay the service on a TV over bagels and cream cheese," Venti said.

The app, with its 100,000 users, is an extension of a multi-site church that has hubs throughout the country. Almost half the online congregation is under 34 years old.

Other churches have apps that allow users to monitor their local events calendar and register for small group gatherings, while new apps like ChurchRyde enable people to carpool to and from Sunday services.

The Catholic Church even has Follow JC Go, much like the augmented-reality game Pokémon Go, that lets users discover biblical icons through a GPS-enabled interface. (JC is shorthand for Jesus Christ.)

At First Corinthian Baptist Church (FCBC) in Harlem, New York, congregants can use the ministry's curated app to make donations, live stream services and access the Bible.

Embracing technology is embedded in the DNA of the historic site which was one of the New York City's first motion picture theaters built in the early 1900s. What was once an opulent auditorium decorated in gold with satin wall panels in the '20s now stands as a sanctuary with massive screens and elaborate lighting displays.

"For us, it was about being relevant to the times," said FCBC pastor Mike Walrond, Jr.

"We have to begin to reimage how church is done ... because we are seeking to minister to a generation of digital natives. The only way to reach them is to be intentional about your digital engagement."

FCBC's app also helps parishioners catch up on services they may have missed, take notes during Sunday service and submit digital prayer requests.

"People enjoy having that type of access," said John Lesley Morton, communications and media director at FCBC. "It's great for you to be able to walk out of the house with just your phone in your hand and come straight to the church without having to carry a Bible or a checkbook or cash."

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