

5 Surprising Reasons Streaming Services May Be a Mistake

If approached incorrectly, online church might actually be a distraction for your church. **Church online can stunt your church's impact if you don't manage it correctly.** Before you send me hate mail or decide that you're no longer going to read my posts, please know that I have been involved in church online since 2009. Over the years I've spent an incredible amount of time, effort, and money on making online church work, and I speak from a place of experience with both failure and success in this area.

We spent several years trying to figure out how to connect live video (or at least simulated live video) to a chat room so that we could minister to people digitally. A funny thing happened in 2015 when Mark Zuckerberg and his team at Facebook developed Facebook Live. This innovation, undoubtedly, made it much simpler for many churches to provide an online church experience to their guests, which was great because too many of us were spending too many resources trying to develop our own online platforms. **While I've heard some interesting stories about churches that made somewhat of an impact, for many churches online church can become more of a distraction to our calling to build local churches where people meet face-to-face.**

Before your church jumps headfirst into church online or if you're questioning whether your current investment of resources is worth it, here are five reasons why I believe church online might be a distraction to your church's vision.

Does it move people towards community?

At its core, the tension within church online is achieving the movement of people from anonymity to community.

When we first started playing with the church online world, we had chat rooms where users could make up their own usernames. At the time I remember struggling with how we were going to help someone with the username "FancyBear213" become a fully devoted follower of Christ. If someone couldn't even identify themselves with their own name and profile picture, how were we going to move those anonymous contacts into community with each other and get them plugged in?

Now granted, the folks at [Saddleback Church](#) have done an incredible job developing online community groups. You should study them and learn from how they are making that happen. Even so, most churches experience online groups as an anonymous mass. I've also seen churches count the attendance at church online in the same way that we count heads on Sunday mornings. However, there is a significant difference between counting IP addresses or "seven-second watch-times" and the people who come in person and actively participate in our communities.

I've written so much about [how difficult it is](#) to [move people from sitting in a seat](#) to [plugging them in](#). This is a struggle we've all shared. How much more difficult is it then to move someone from the anonymous space of their phone or laptop to connecting with others in "real" life? There isn't a clear path, and investing time, effort, and energy at this point would be a waste of your resources.

At the same time, there are people attending your live services today, the old-fashioned Sunday morning crowd sitting in rows, who also aren't plugged into community. Work harder at what could be a real growth opportunity in your "[IRL](#)" services.

Online tends towards amalgamation.

In the end, there will probably be one or two very large online church presences. There aren't hundreds and thousands of online retailers; there's Amazon. There aren't thousands of places to stream shows and movies; there's Netflix. There aren't hundreds of incredibly popular, niche search engines; there's Google. The same is bound to happen with church online. The drive of the internet is to reward a few very large content and community providers. The [network effect](#) takes over and those providers with the largest communities win in the end.

Over time, some churches will figure out how to use this medium for outreach, but chances are it's not going to be your church or my church. The contenders could be churches like Saddleback, or North Point, or Life.Church. These churches are indeed doing incredible work already, but the reality of it is online media tends to amalgamate into one or two very large, dominant leaders. **The way that Amazon, Netflix, Google, and a myriad of other online sectors have narrowed down to one or two leaders will also happen with church online.**

On a Sunday morning sometime soon, take the opportunity to scroll through different online church experiences. What do you notice? They're all very similar; they're not differentiated from each other. **Over time, what happens in an undifferentiated market is some player ends up becoming more dominant through significant differentiation.** Every other player in that market offers a "commodity offering" while a single player or two stand out with above average differentiated offerings and gain the majority of the mindshare. Today we might not see a clear leader, but I believe that over time one will emerge.

Instead of focusing on how you can outdo some other large church on the other side of the country, consider how you can attract people who live within the vicinity of your church to come and attend. In fact, the act of trying to differentiate online could take you away from the value of reaching people in your own area.

On demand beats scheduled live every time.

One of the secrets of the church online movement is that most online churches have exponentially fewer viewers of live broadcasts than on-demand services. Ask a church how many people view their video for longer than five minutes on a Sunday morning and ask that same church how many downloads their podcast receives. **You'll find that the on-demand**

content of churches outperform live scheduled content at a rate of at least five to one, if not 10 to one.

Of course, it's no surprise this is happening. The internet is moving towards more time freedom and away from scheduled content. We're used to binging content rather than waiting for new content to be released every week. In fact, "long form live video" on Facebook—the clear leader in live video—is considered five minutes long. Typically anyone trying to engage in a Facebook Live environment will warn you not to go beyond 60 to 90 seconds in a live video (whereas most online church experiences range from 60 to 90 minutes!).

These forms don't fit the style of what's happening in our churches. I think that trying to leverage a live format rather than an on-demand style is distracting. You already have a significant, on-demand audience downloading your podcasts, so instead of trying to develop an entirely new schedule of live content, how are you leveraging what you already have to increase numbers at your services?

Churches are “family ministries”.

Churches have consistently grown on the back of family ministries as they provide an opportunity for parents to attend with their kids. **There is a well-worn path of providing excellent age-appropriate programming for both parents and children as a way to make an impact and see your church grow.** As Carey Nieuwhof has said, “Very few church people are lying in bed tonight wondering how to parse a Greek verb but they are lying awake at night wondering about their kids and how they can raise their family.”

Church online, on the other hand, is tending towards a solitary adult experience. Facebook does not allow anyone [under the age of 13](#) to view any videos, which eliminates a significant market. Nearly half of all people who become Christ followers did so [before the age of 13](#). So imagine a church online experience where there are no ministries available to individuals under that important age! For the most part, churches haven't figured out how to develop church online where the family attends together. These experiences are solitary, lonely ones rather than shared experiences for the entire family.

Just as it would be strange to have a church where there was no kids' ministry, church online seems to be saying it's okay for you to come by yourself. **This is a distraction from the purpose of developing community and connection within our churches.** Your church needs to continue to invest in and understand how you can attract families to attend your church together. Families in your area are looking for a church like yours. The question is how are you developing ministries that ultimately draw them closer together within the community of your church?

We are a gathered community.

The word “church” literally means gathering. I'm waiting for the day when virtual reality replaces the act of gathering physically. **In the same way that [Second Life](#) rose and fell from**

popularity, I'm still waiting (in vain) for Oculus Rift or other virtual reality environments to offer the same experience as gathering together.

I've even seen attempts to do communion or baptisms online. In fact, I've been a part of crafting some of those experiences. **The truth? They fall flat compared to the live equivalents.** There is something about the gathered body of Christ worshipping in the same room that transcends. In a western world with such an emphasis and focus on the individual, church online offers the opposite of what it means to be a community.

Church online focuses on people being separate from each other, whereas the physical church focuses on the literal gathering. You could invest a significant amount of time, effort, and energy figuring out how on earth to have an online gathering in a way that is appropriate and feels connected, but it's just a distraction. You already have people attending your church. Consider this: how are those in-person interactions maximizing the sense of togetherness and experience of something transcendent?

Years ago, Christian television featured men sitting at desks talking into microphones. What they had done was transform an old format, radio ministry, to a new medium. However, they merely replicated their radio ministry to a moving picture format. Similarly, the notion of a schedule-based video format feels like a stale representation. Yes, your church should be thinking about how people connect seven days a week with your ministry. **I do believe that you should leverage social media as a way to stay in front of people consistently, but I also encourage you to examine how others in the medium connect with their audiences and build a community around those connections.**

What you won't see are scheduled, live videos once a week where you feel as if you are sitting in an audience. You experience much more intimate and interactive approaches. [If:Gathering is paving the way on this point. Jennie Allen](#) and her visionary leadership of this group hint towards what the future of church online will look like. **This organization is a collection of live events, apps for your phone, books, videos, and incredible social media all working to see people grow closer to Jesus, which is the ultimate goal of all this connection.** I think the future of online engagement as a church will look more like If:Gathering than what we tend to see in the church online world today.

Finally, I believe that it is right to wonder how we can use digital platforms for engagement; however, church online itself is not the answer. It's asking the right question and it's pointing in the right direction, but I don't think it's the answer. It's a stage between knowing there's a problem of connection and needing to figure out how to best resolve it.

> [Read more from Rich.](#)
