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Virtual Rector:
Ministering to a Congregation from 500 Miles Away

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Abstract

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Up until the Covid-19 pandemic, the Episcopal Church has largely shunned having much of a digital presence, and has done very little online ministry-wise. My project, ‘Virtual Rector,’ seeks to share how I have led St. David’s Episcopal Church in San Diego from 500 miles away in Sacramento, completely through technology – the internet, phone, and even the mail. I have conducted worship, programming, meetings, provided pastoral care, and built relationships over the past year without ever being on the church property or with my congregation in person. The lessons I have learned could help church planters consider the possibilities for entirely digital ministries. As many Episcopal churches continue to shrink in size and struggle to afford clergy salary packages, a Virtual Rector model may provide a roadmap for clergy to lead congregations where they do not – or, perhaps, cannot – live. At the beginning of 2020, what I am now doing would have been deemed impossible. But with no other choice, I am learning how to be a Virtual Rector, and through my experience, now others can do this too. This is an entirely new model of ministry that will only benefit the church for the 21st century and beyond.

Virtual Rector:
Ministering to a Congregation from 500 Miles Away

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Dedication

To my incredible husband, Chris, who always supports me in life and ministry, and made being a Virtual Rector possible with his technical skills and expertise, time, and heart: I give thanks to God every day for you.

Introduction

In January 2020, I accepted the call to be Rector of St. David's Episcopal Church and Preschool in San Diego. This is a pastoral size congregation, located in the Bay Park/Clairemont neighborhood of the City of San Diego. I was attracted to this parish because it had a thriving Preschool (although there was practically no crossover of families into the church program), and it contributed \$30,000 to the church operating budget annually. They also were highly active in outreach to the community, operating a weekly Food Pantry ministry, and hosting the rotating Interfaith Winter Homeless Shelter. St. David's has had a difficult ten years, wracked by conflict and a revolving door of clergy. During my interview, the Bishop shared that they had done hard work on conflict management to overcome this pattern of dysfunction, and she felt they were ready to move forward with new communication skills and a healthy future outlook. There seemed to be great potential here: diverse revenue streams from the Preschool and a Cell Tower; a great location, a large, beautiful physical plant, plus dedicated lay people who loved God and were committed to caring for the least in the community. It was exactly the kind of community I was looking to lead – so, I accepted the call, and my start date was set for late April, after Easter.

In mid-March, the Covid-19 pandemic closed everything down. The Preschool closed, and most of the church's revenue streams ground to a halt. The Vestry no longer knew if they could afford to proceed with hiring me. However, they were able to secure a Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) Loan from the government, which gave them the capital to reopen the Preschool. Still, they could not afford to pay my contracted salary. This was crucial, as the cost of living in San Diego is at least double the cost of living in my current location of Sacramento. After much prayer, I let the Vestry know that they could pay me a lower salary if I remained in

Sacramento until the budget allowed them to pay my contracted salary amount, enabling my family to relocate to San Diego.

Truly, this kind of arrangement would have been unthinkable pre-pandemic. How can a priest be a rector of a church from 500 miles away? Due to the pandemic, worship and nearly all of the church's programming moved online. Furthermore, the Bishop directed clergy and staff to work remotely, and to forgo all in person meetings and pastoral visits. Thus, most of the things I could do from a home in San Diego to serve St. David's, I could also do from Sacramento. I suddenly found myself cast in the role of a 'Virtual Rector.' By this, I mean I am a rector who connects and leads her people solely through technological means – the internet, phone, even the postal mail, but not in person.

My project, 'Virtual Rector,' will be a sharing of the things I have learned and implemented to lead a group of people I barely knew and who barely knew me, through a pandemic, from 500 miles away. The implications of this model of ministry are important. Church planters can use this to plant entirely digital communities. Also, as many Episcopal Churches continue to shrink in size and struggle to afford clergy salary packages, a Virtual Rector model may provide a roadmap for clergy to lead congregations where they do not – or, perhaps, cannot – live. According to the *Parochial Report Statistics of 2019*, 75% of Episcopal Churches worship fewer than 100 people each Sunday.¹ Additionally, there are 413 congregations (out of 6,393 total) with 10 or fewer Average Sunday Attendance (ASA), up from 383 in 2018. Indeed, the membership trends in this latest report indicate continued decline in church attendance and size. Simply put, Episcopal Churches are small and getting smaller, and ASA is shrinking as well. In 2004, the year I was ordained, there were 6,288 full time clergy

¹ "Fast Facts from Parochial Report Data 2019."

servicing across the church. In 2019, that number has shrunk to only 4,677 full time clergy.² This means there are likely 2000 or more churches that do not have a priest serving them full-time. Furthermore, The Episcopal Foundation, in a presentation for their ‘New Dreams/New Visions’ initiative notes that according to the Church Pension Fund, “We might be looking at over 50% of our congregations needing ‘less-than-full time clergy’ given that compensation and benefit costs are rising.”³ Post-pandemic, a Virtual Rector model of ministry could breathe new life into these parishes providing a financially sustainable way to support these parishes.

As our world adjusts to the increased use of technology and life with Covid-19 continuing to circulate at some level, the need for clergy to be able to operate within the virtual space will only increase. In the same way doctors now conduct ‘video visits’ more frequently, clergy may likewise be called upon to be available through the internet and other technological means. It is clear that the world is going to be a tremendously changed place, and the Episcopal Church and its clergy will need to be ready to respond.

In this project, I will share and analyze the ways I have approached worship, pastoral care, built relationships, related to the physical property, and connected with those who are not on the internet. Most of the scholarship around Virtual Ministry of the past 30 years has encouraged the church to be present online and has argued that it is theologically possible to have religion in a virtual setting. Yet, they were mainly speaking from a position in which presence on the internet was one of many possible options. The pandemic made shifting ministry to the internet imperative, so many of the theoretical questions about whether the church should be on the internet evaporated overnight, and suddenly we found ourselves forced to be

² “Clergy Compensation Report.”

³ “Moving From Full-Time to Part-Time Clergy Leadership: A Complex and Often Difficult Time for a Congregation...but Might There Be an Opportunity?”

there, with no preparation or forethought in most instances. This experience has felt like building the boat while trying to sail it, and if the things I have learned can help other potential Virtual Rectors to structure a ministry to serve communities where they are not physically present, then this will be an important advancement for the Church coming out of this pandemic experience.

Context: St. David's, San Diego

St. David's Episcopal Church was planted as a house church in the Clairemont neighborhood of San Diego in 1954. Land was purchased in 1959, and the Church and Education Center were built. The "Ed Center" is the oldest building on the campus. It is two stories and includes classrooms now used by the Preschool, an AA room, and a dedicated space for the Food Pantry ministry. In 1991, arson destroyed the Church building; and a new sanctuary and office building was constructed in 1997. The Mission Center (Parish Hall) was built in 2008, with the stated purpose of being for the wider community's use. It has an industrial kitchen, bathrooms with showers, and laundry facility. These three buildings are arranged on a grassy quad, with the upper-level parking lot on the fourth side. There is a smaller dirt parking lot below and behind the Ed Center, on the lower level of the building behind the Preschool play yard. The congregation paid off the mortgage on the Mission Center in 2017 by selling the revenue from a T-Mobile Cell Tower, which was constructed on the property in 2006. That sale also enabled them to place about \$100,000 in reserve, which has helped sustain the church through the pandemic. In 2020, the budget for the Church and Preschool combined totaled

nearly \$800,000. The pandemic resulted in over a \$100,000 net loss in 2020, and the budget for 2021 is reduced as well.⁴

Demographically speaking, like most Episcopal churches, St. David's is an aging congregation. Of the 123 people in the parish database, 25 do not list a birth year. Of the remaining 98 people, more than half (56) are over 65 years old, 20 people are 31-64 years old, 12 are 18-30 years old, and 10 are under 17 years old. Through the Listening Campaign I will describe in detail later, I interviewed 74 parishioners and learned that more than half of them have been a part of the St. David's for more than twenty years. 26 people reported being 'cradle Episcopalians.'⁵ Thus, these are primarily long-time members who have also been Episcopalians for most or all of their lives.

Many of the parishioners are retired professionals. 20 people reported having worked in schools, mainly as teachers (14 people), which was the largest profession represented. Nine people worked in the nonprofit sector (management, MFT, social work), 12 in the military/government sector. 11 worked in the medical field, with more than half of them as nurses. Additionally, they are lawyers, clergy, and artists (designers and musicians), some were in banking, real estate, and insurance; plus one architect and one waitress. Nine had been stay-at-home-parents. In general, this is an educated congregation with diverse careers and professional experiences.

An interestingly higher-than-expected number of parishioners have what I note as a connection to disability, either themselves or a close loved one (spouse or child). Eight had permanently disabled children, spouses, or are themselves. Several have children or

⁴ The PPP Loan totaled \$120,000 so much of the reserve funds were protected.

⁵ 13 were previously Roman Catholics (one sojourned in an Evangelical church in between). Others came from the Southern Baptist (4), United Methodist (3), Presbyterian (3), Evangelical and LCMS (1 each). Five had not been part of any church before the Episcopal Church.

grandchildren affected by autism or ADHD. This is a unique aspect of this parish. When the church was rebuilt after the arson, they purposefully designed it without any stairs so that all parts of the sanctuary could be reached by one in a wheelchair. For that reason, a seemingly high number of differently abled families felt welcomed by St. David's. Mental illness and struggles with cancer were also often reported. Several had lost loved ones to suicide. Alcoholism was also prevalent – six are in recovery and active in Alcoholics Anonymous, several more were children or spouses of alcoholics. Several had lost children to overdose or addiction. One member lost a child to AIDS. Two families have dealt with incarceration. There are widows and widowers, divorcees, children caring for elderly parents, and multigenerational families living under the same roof. People noted there is no organized LGBTQ community at the church, even though there are members who identify as such. Indeed, this is a diverse group of adults in many respects, although racially they are almost completely a white congregation.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Several scholars have written throughout the past three decades about the role of the internet and religion. In 2001, Brenda Brashear's book *Give Me That Online Religion* argued online religion would be an "integral part of our global future."⁶ Yet, it has not been uncommon for people of faith to be suspicious of technological advances and to embrace them slowly or not at all. Still, some have been quick to jump on the technology bandwagon, and thus had a bit of a leg-up on the pandemic-shift onto the internet. The Episcopal Church, in general, is in the former category. While St. David's has a website and a Facebook page, maintaining or updating

⁶ George, *Religion and Technology in the 21st Century: Faith in the E-World*, 96.

these were not the priority for funding or staff time. Indeed, the use of screens in worship for most Episcopal Churches, St. David's included, is practically sacrilegious. Technology such as microphones is common and even now considered necessary, as congregations age many parishioners need amplified sound. But Episcopalians tend to prefer technology and church stay separated.

But what is 'virtual religion?' Susan George in *Religion and Technology* claims it is hard to define.⁷ She writes: "'Virtual' is derived from the Latin word *virtus*, meaning truth: that which is 'virtual' looks like reality, but is not completely real. Thus the term 'virtual' is often applied to the e-world of computer-mediated communication, a world that is essentially intangible."⁸ While intangible, that does not mean unreal. We should not imply that virtual religion is not real religion. She continues, "it is also that 'religion' that is finding electronic expression. Virtual religion is religion that occurs in the virtual world."⁹ That is, the term 'virtual' simply locates religion where it is: online and accessed through the internet. Thus, virtual religion is 'real life' religion that takes place in that virtual world.

Deanna Thompson in *The Virtual Body of Christ in a Suffering World* evaluates the notion of virtual as being either not real, or approaching reality, but not quite getting there. She states we should not contrast 'virtual reality' with 'actual reality' or 'real life,' because "virtual reality is a continuation of real reality... being present online never actually negates our offline existence."¹⁰ One cannot exist solely in a virtual world without always already being in the real world. This is true for our communications as well. Conversations and interactions that happen digitally are no less real or true than 'real life' conversations are. One can have a conversation

⁷ George, 2.

⁸ George, 15.

⁹ George, 15.

¹⁰ Thompson, *The Virtual Body of Christ in a Suffering World*, 24–25.

with someone face to face that has no depth or connection, and conversely, one can have deep and meaningful exchanges with someone they have never seen an image of online. So, a virtual interaction should not be considered any less real or impactful, just because it took place in a digital space.¹¹

Rachel Wagner in *Godwired* seeks to explain what religion in the virtual space looks like. She uses the term ‘online’ instead of ‘virtual,’ explaining that there is a difference between ‘religion online’ and ‘online religion.’ The former involves the transmission of information from one person to many, and is a passive thing.¹² Online religion, then, is what happens when rituals, worship, or other religious experiences take place in the digital space and becomes their primary home.¹³ Heidi Campbell in *Digital Religion* agrees: “‘Digital religion’ does not simply refer to religion as it is performed and articulated online, but points to how digital media and spaces are shaping and being shaped by religious practice. As a concept, it allows us to talk about the current state of religion in relation to digital artifacts and the culture in which it is situated.”¹⁴ Because of this, there is a symbiosis happening as religion situates itself in the digital world, and it affects both the virtual world and religion itself. She explains further that:

Based on this I suggest that the term “digital religion” describes the technological and cultural space that is evoked when we talk about how online and offline religious spheres have become blended or integrated. We can think of digital religion as a bridge that connects and extends online religious practices and spaces into offline religious contexts, and vice versa. This merging of new and established notions of religious practice means digital religion is imprinted by both the traits of online culture (such as interactivity, convergence, and audience-generated content) and traditional religion (such as patterns of belief and ritual tied to historically grounded communities).¹⁵

¹¹ Thompson, 25.

¹² For example, people often use apps to pray, read scripture, and network with other believers. Social media allows faithful people to come together across the miles to share prayer requests or fellowship with one another. The internet stores information and commentaries, blogs and photos of religiously significant places and artifacts.

¹³ Wagner, *Godwired: Religion, Ritual, and Virtual Reality*, 133.

¹⁴ Campbell, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, 14.

¹⁵ Campbell, 15–16.

The boundaries between virtual and offline existence are thus increasingly blurry, and impossible to define. There is fluidity and continuity across the cyber-line that is unavoidable now, so carrying religion into the virtual sphere is a logical – and perhaps inevitable – next step.

Because technology is pervasive and invasive in our lives and it is here to stay, Kirk Bingaman argues that religious professionals must contend with it. In *Pastoral and Spiritual Care in a Digital Age*, he argues, “theology can, it *must* aim at understanding and helping to clarify the existential value and meaning of technology, the new thing that God is doing in the present day and age, thus making it perfectly clear that it is indeed possible and necessary to put God and technology together in our theological reflection.”¹⁶ Indeed, there is no denying that technology has taken over our lives. Most people have smart phones, and at least a computer and a tablet of some kind. Smart watches, Alexa, smart TVs – all these devices are becoming more and more common in households, even among self-identified luddites. For this reason, scholars such as Wagner describe our present reality as ‘augmented reality.’ That is, we are now constantly connected to the internet – to the world online – even as we go through our embodied, daily lives.¹⁷ So, this augmented reality means we are never *really* disconnected from technology or the internet, even when we are not sitting in front of a screen.

Yet, one must have a corporeal body to be present online, in a digital/virtual world. Teresa Berger in *@Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds*, states, “in fact no digital world can be entered, no website accessed, and no app installed without a body. Thus, digitally

¹⁶ Bingaman, *Pastoral and Spiritual Care in a Digital Age: The Future Is Now*, 26.

¹⁷ For example, my phone dings with a notification that a friend on Facebook has sent me a message while I cook dinner for my kids. My Echo Show scrolls through news headlines when it is idle on the counter. My Samsung smart watch tracks my heart rate and logs it in an app that charts my overall health.

mediated practices too are bodily practices.”¹⁸ For that reason, Keith Anderson and Elizabeth Drescher in *Click2Save Reboot* argue that digital ministry is inherently incarnational:

We see the incarnational desire – the desire to encounter those who have come to have meaning in our lives in face-to-face settings – as a critical theological component of digitally integrated ministry. It is networked, relational, *and* profoundly incarnational. This incarnational orientation is essential, we believe, perhaps especially when our desire is unlikely to be realized – when it isn’t possible to meet those we encounter online in person.¹⁹

Technology allows embodied people to be connected and in communication with one another when we cannot be face to face. The fact that the incarnated bodies are in separate places diminishes because the internet enables connection between them to happen approximating the experience they may have had if they were physically close.

If the virtual space is incarnational, it must be utterly different than the physical world and the Divine realm. Campbell calls it a ‘third space:’

This echoes assertions made by Hoover and Echchaibi (2012) that discussion of ‘the religious digital’ requires a recentering... They suggest that when lived religious practice and digital culture meet a ‘third space’ emerges, a hybridized and fluid context requiring new logics and evoking unique forms of meaning-making.²⁰

This third space is a new world, and to the degree that the digital world is entirely about creation and creating whole new worlds, it corresponds with what religion seeks to do as well. It is cosmological.²¹ The virtual world must be built, through websites, platforms, or games. What is there only comes to be once someone constructs it, and then users interact with others to craft the rules and norms of the space. This third space requires creation, covenants, community and significance to be functional. Otherwise, the virtual space is nothing at all.

¹⁸ Berger, *@Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds*, 18.

¹⁹ Anderson and Drescher, *Click2Save REBOOT: The Digital Ministry Bible*, 251.

²⁰ Campbell, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, 16.

²¹ Campbell, 1–2.

Not all religious groups or people may see the digital world as a place that is conducive to religious practice. Campbell writes, “One of the key divisions between religious groups that oppose ritual activity on the Internet and groups that have embraced it concerns the perceived legitimacy of the online space as ritual space and the online symbols as authentic manifestations of their sacred objects.”²² At the time Campbell and my other sources were writing, asking questions like ‘can the internet contain sacred objects?’ was theoretically important. However, when faced with a pandemic in which people are told to stay home and not interact with people outside of their households, these questions became somewhat moot. The internet was the only safe option, especially for Christians who have no barriers to using technology in general.²³ We proceeded with placing the sacred online, and have learned valuable lessons from doing this.

There are upsides to using the internet for religious practice. George notes that in 1999, the Society of Archbishop Justus published a tract called, “Church and the Internet,”²⁴ arguing that “[the internet] ‘can help the church with its mission as no technology since the printing press has been able to help. It can be used to bring more information to more people more cheaply. It allows people to form communities without needing buildings. And it will reach the young.’”²⁵ This captures the sort of standard arguments as to why the Church should be on the internet. Now, however, it is not just about reaching the ‘young.’ All people are affected by the pandemic, and thus need a way to have worship and community without gathering in a building. While younger people may have already been more comfortable with the internet and various platforms, now many people have had to learn how to use them for a variety of functions they

²² Campbell, 44.

²³ Unlike Orthodox Jews, for example, who are religiously prohibited from using technology to practice their faith, Christians in general and Episcopalians certainly have no such restriction.

²⁴ Reid, “The Church and the Internet.”

²⁵ George, *Religion and Technology in the 21st Century: Faith in the E-World*, 143.

previously did differently or in person. Going forward, it will be interesting to see how much these ways of living by and through the internet continue.²⁶

Yet, the crucial question remains: can people encounter God virtually? Bingaman answers this by appealing to the Ignatian principle that God is present everywhere to argue that God is online too.²⁷ Wagner insightfully suggests we should consider the virtual world as *hierophany*, as a place that can manifest the sacred. If this is true, then, “the screen serves as an entry point into the Transcendent.”²⁸ A virtual space can contain the sacred because the creators of that space, and the people who gather there, come together for the specific purpose of experiencing the Divine.²⁹ She continues, “when sacred space is constructed in a virtual context, its sacredness is endowed via its symbolic power and via the rules imposed by builders to apply within that sacred space – that is, purely by intent.”³⁰ This suggests that it is possible to construct a place in the virtual world that allows people to connect with God in a way that is similar to – or even the same as – what one would experience inside the walls of a church.

But the internet is often referred to as the modern ‘Wild, Wild West,’ where rules and restrictions often do not apply or are difficult (or impossible) to enforce. Indeed, when faith is practiced online, the control over practice and belief shifts to those who are gathered. We have witnessed this in the ongoing debate in the Episcopal Church around so-called ‘virtual communion,’ over whether a priest can validly consecrate the Eucharist through the internet. If a priest says the Eucharistic prayer and a person sits in front of the screen with bread and wine and

²⁶ My Senior Warden has commented more than once that now we are comfortable meeting on Zoom, she sees no reason to ever have another in person Vestry meeting ever again.

²⁷ Bingaman, 23.

²⁸ Wagner, *Godwired: Religion, Ritual, and Virtual Reality*, 80.

²⁹ Wagner is considering whether religion can be practiced within a game, for example. However, I think her contention applies to our pandemic church reality that when we cannot gather in person, the internet can serve as a place where the sacred can manifest.

³⁰ Wagner, *Godwired: Religion, Ritual, and Virtual Reality*, 94.

believes it has been consecrated, and consumes those elements under that belief, even though Episcopal Bishops have stated this is not a valid Eucharist, who can really prevent the person from either doing this or believing they have legitimately taken communion? Wagner contends, “Authenticity of religious experience, no longer just in the hands of recognized religious authorities or received fixed rituals, is in *our* hands – and metaphorically also in the mobile devices we hold *in* our hands.”³¹ Likewise, Campbell adds:

Individuals have a great deal of freedom in the online environment to experiment, and even develop their own views regarding the role of the Internet in religious ritual life. In most cases, the religious authorities of the church or organization are the “gatekeepers” that control how that organization will utilize Internet technology. It is the people in charge of the group who decide if they need a website, what the website will contain, how it will be developed, and so forth. However, in the contemporary Western society, there is a great deal of individual religiosity or “patchwork” religion, and although the “official” church position may be that online rituals are not authentic, people may choose to disagree.³²

In virtual religious practice, the parishioner gets to decide if she has experienced God or not.

Bishops may have less control over doctrine and dogma in the online space, as people can pick and choose where they will ‘go to church’ and how. This dynamic can be liberating or infuriating, depending on how it is used and approached by all involved.

Online Worship

There are churches that have existed only online and churches that have a hybrid presence – both brick-and-mortar and live streamed or prerecorded services. Still, Berger states, “as studies have shown, the vast majority of worshippers do not leave brick-and-mortar churches behind for online sanctuaries but rather are active in more than one realm.”³³ However, when the

³¹ Wagner, *Godwired: Religion, Ritual, and Virtual Reality*, 105.

³² Campbell, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, 44.

³³ Berger, *@Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds*, 37.

pandemic forced all churches to close, there was no choice but to move worship online. In seeking to make a digital space feel like church, Campbell asserts that it is possible to employ the same strategies we use in physical buildings to construct an online worship space: “Through ‘discursive framing strategies’ people in these new online environments created places where ritual could occur and through their own construction, shared narratives, and similar vision, they perceived these places to be special, set apart, and even sacred.”³⁴ So the first step for online worship is to visually create a space that signifies church. This can be accomplished through art, images of church buildings, religious symbols, and the like. Properly constructed, the digital environment on the screen can lend itself to invoking feelings in the same way a physical place does.

Of course, the main difference is that worshippers are not physically together. Even if a community is watching a service together live (at the same time), the experience of the ritual and liturgy is different. Berger writes:

The unmooring of worship from brick-and-mortar sanctuaries together with the emergence of non-local sacred spaces signals the ascendancy of liturgical simultaneity over physical co-presence. In digitally mediated worship, ‘perceived co-presence’ rather than ‘physical co-location’ becomes a defining feature. This shift heightens the importance of synchronicity, because liturgical simultaneity plays a key role when the co-presence of worshippers is mediated digitally.³⁵

An important aspect of communal worship is that the community is together while worshipping. This may seem impossible if people are not physically together, but the belief or sense that the community exists and is gathered can still happen even when people are not physically together. Therefore, encouraging social interaction during online worship becomes important: as people watch the service on social media, they can use the chat feature to greet one another and the

³⁴ Campbell, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, 43.

³⁵ Berger, *@Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds*, 106.

reaction buttons to share emotional responses. This not only gives the viewer a chance to interact with what she is viewing; it also allows other viewers to know of the presence of others and connect with what they are also feeling and experiencing simultaneously.

This concept of *presence* online is important. George argues that conceptualizations of presence manifest in two ways: “(1) physical presence – referring to the perception of being physically located in a medium and (2) social presence – referring to the feeling of being together and in communication with someone in a medium.”³⁶ The viewers may see their priest on the screen, their friend reading a lesson, the organist playing a hymn, which physically locates the people on the screen in real life and within the liturgy. Yet it is also important to be connecting socially, so to have the priest who is on the screen responding to comments in the chat lets the community know the priest is indeed “there” too.³⁷

For this, we may look to younger people for guidance as they have been seeking connection virtually for years now. Andrew Zirschky argues that adults have often misinterpreted teenagers’ behavior as seeking escape from the ‘real world’ through digital connection on social media and video games. He argues that instead of escaping reality, young people are seeking connection with those with whom they are not physically present, and they do it using phatic communication. “Phatic exchanges create a sense of connectedness and personal availability.”³⁸ This is a style of communication that lets the other person realize that one is not alone, and that a connection is happening. He explains, “A truly phatic acknowledgment of

³⁶ George, *Religion and Technology in the 21st Century: Faith in the E-World*, 173.

³⁷ That connection is important, especially when one popular option during the pandemic has been to simply watch the National Cathedral’s worship, or Trinity Wall Street – churches that were already filming and sharing their worship services regularly. They had the infrastructure and knowledge about doing this before the pandemic, and so the quality of their broadcasts has been far and above what most clergy and small churches can produce. But in times of crisis, people report that seeing *their* community, the people they know and love on the screen, makes a difference for their worship experience and ability to connect with God in online worship in general.

³⁸ Zirschky, *Beyond the Screen: Youth Ministry for the Connected But Alone Generation*, 42.

presence is not merely an acknowledgement that the other person exists in the universe, but rather it's a declaration that the other person is with us, and that we are with him or her."³⁹

Texting, emojis, and the parlance of online culture accomplishes more than just an exchange of speech or thoughts. All of this serves to create a bond and a kind of presence across the digital miles. Due to the pandemic, older adults – indeed, society at large – have now learned of this reality too.

One potential, and real, issue that doing worship online raises is whether churches are just producing content. That is, is this about marketing – getting clicks, likes, and shares? The cachet that comes with 'going viral?' Berger writes, "An important question is whether such practices of 'liturgy on demand,' at the service of a 'user' or 'consumer,' are not dangerously close to worship-as-commodity. Some do not see a danger here, but simply life in the digital age."⁴⁰ The dynamics of moving church to the virtual space does change things, as it gives the worshippers control over what they will consume, and when. Churches are accustomed to setting their own schedules and people either come at the appointed time or they do not. Yet, when services and programs are offered and available online, they must be palatable and interesting. They must be something people will be willing to view, and perhaps even share. So, the old dynamic of seeking to get "butts in pews" shifts to getting views, likes, and shares. Indeed, some of that is just the nature of the internet, but religious practitioners still have to be careful and intentional about what the goal of online church is, and what success in this space looks like.

³⁹ Zirschky, 43–44.

⁴⁰ Berger, *@Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds*, 28.

The Ancient/Future Church

Many envision the internet and doing religion online as an innovation, believing that the church moving into the virtual space constitutes God ‘doing a new thing.’ However, numerous theorists have pointed out that using prevailing forms of communication to share and practice faith is not new at all. Berger points out, “Most authors writing at the intersection of theology and new media endeavor to show that God’s self-communication has always been mediated in manifold ways. Divine self-disclosure, in other words, itself is a ‘media event,’ and often a multi-mediated one, for that matter.”⁴¹ Humans have always used whatever media is available at the time to communicate about God, both narrative and doctrine. Texts have been written and shared, plus artists have created drawings, paintings, stained glass, tapestries, and sculptures to convey the story of God and move people to have spiritual experiences. Technological innovations like the printing press and then broadcast media have always been utilized by religious folk to share their faith as widely as possible. In *Tweet If You [Heart] Jesus*, Drescher notes that church services were broadcast on the radio as early as 1921, and it was an Episcopal Church service, no less.⁴² As television became more widespread, the church moved onto that medium, and in 1961, Pat Robertson launched the first Christian television station.⁴³

Is the internet any different than a painting, a book, or a video? Certainly, the internet can contain all of these media as experienced through a screen. The physical experience of standing in front of a brilliant stained-glass window *is* different from seeing a photo of it, either printed in your hands or on a screen. The question, then, is can God speak through these virtual representations? Thompson argues that according to scripture, Christ is *always* virtually with us

⁴¹ Berger, 79.

⁴² Drescher, *Tweet If You Love Jesus: Practicing Church in the Digital Reformation*.

⁴³ Indeed, nowadays people can watch church services on a variety of channels (both broadcast and cable) nearly 24 hours a day.

according to Matthew 28:20.⁴⁴ Furthermore, if we consider the apostle Paul's ministry, we realize that his was a virtual relationship or even virtual pastorship with multiple Christian communities separated by hundreds of miles. Paul wrote letters that traveled by boat and foot to Christians that had met him in person and those that had not, to guide, affirm, correct, and encourage them. He also instructed them in matters of faith and religious practice. She explains:

It is clear that Paul's leadership and guidance through his letters shaped how these fledgling churches attempt to live into what it means to be the body of Christ; at the same time, this primarily virtual approach to leadership empowered agency and lay leadership within the communities as they put into practice this vision of community and ministry.⁴⁵

Paul was able to lead, even pastor, communities without being physically present, and without the instant access that the internet gives us today.

This works, Thompson argues, because we are the Body of Christ, which is a virtual body. As Christ – in Spirit – is present in and with each of his followers, their bodies make up the Body of Christ, the Church. This universal Body consists of local – separate – church bodies, which unite to make the Body of Christ whole. Recognizing these connections enable “the body of Christ [to] experience connection to that vast virtual body of Christ, one that connects us not just to other Christians around the world in the present but also to all previous incarnations of the body of Christ in the two-thousand-year history of the church.”⁴⁶ The virtual body of Christ thus transcends space and time, and God has been communicating to humans through various human invented media constantly. Our faith has always been a virtual one, utilizing media to connect people (and the Divine) with one another who are not always able to be physically present. Once this is acknowledged, the opportunities for online ministry suddenly seem more accessible. The Virtual Church, then, is really an ancient church oriented to the future.

⁴⁴ Thompson, *The Virtual Body of Christ in a Suffering World*, 31.

⁴⁵ Thompson, 42.

⁴⁶ Thompson, 49.

Doing Virtual Ministry

For most of 2020, and the entirety of my tenure with St. David's, I have not been physically present with them, and have truly little knowledge of their property or the community where it is located. I was only there for two days in December of 2019 to interview, and then over President's Weekend in February 2020, when I was able to worship with them (from the pews, with my family). Indeed, it has been a very strange start to this rectorship for all of us, but we have learned valuable lessons that I believe can help the Church as we move into the post-pandemic world, and the future in general.

St. David's Online Worship

Worship is the primary locus of any church community and necessitates careful consideration of how to do it online. Much of the advice for clergy when the pandemic began was to take what your community had been doing for worship and simply move it online. Being new, I did not have that prior knowledge, and had to start from scratch.⁴⁷ Because there was about a month from the beginning of lockdown until when I started, I was able to watch what other churches were doing online. The Bishop of San Diego had asked the clergy not to film or stream live from inside the church building. She felt it was important for setting a good example and being in solidarity with the community to remain at home.⁴⁸ Thus, I wanted to have a way to use the screen to remind people of the church visually. I also wanted people to be able to see me

⁴⁷ St. David's attempted to have worship on Zoom three times before I came on board, and it was described by more than one person as 'terrible.'

⁴⁸ Brown Snook, "Salt and Light: Bishop's Letter to the Diocese," March 20, 2020. She wrote: "...we offer a better witness to our frightened, anxious world by staying home as we have been asked to do, and live-streaming worship from our homes."

and other worship leaders. It also helped to have the words to the prayers and the hymns on the screen. How to do all of this? My husband is an entrepreneur in the video game industry and has done a bit of streaming himself. Thankfully, he was comfortable using a free software program called OBS, which allows us to put a photo of the church altar on the screen (adorned in appropriate liturgical colors), plus display the video of the person speaking and to run PowerPoint slides with words to the prayers and hymns throughout the service. We also happened to own a podcasting mic and a high-quality webcam.

To make worship as widely available as possible, I wanted to explore using Facebook or YouTube to broadcast the services. I put together a survey, “St. David’s Virtual Programming Survey,” for the congregation to learn about their access and preferences for doing both worship and programming online, among other programming and worship questions. The Survey results are included in Appendix A. Slightly more people indicated they were comfortable using Facebook, so I decided to stream our service from OBS to Facebook. I produced a video explaining why we would be saying Morning Prayer⁴⁹ on Sundays (due to the prohibition on Virtual Communion), and why we would be using OBS, enabling us to have multiple people from different homes involved.⁵⁰ For the first few weeks, the worship leaders (myself, two lectors, a Gospeler, an intercessor, and the music director) met on Zoom.⁵¹ We did the service

⁴⁹ I have tinkered with the Morning Prayer liturgy. Doing worship online makes congregational responses impossible. To solve this, the person reading says the sentence and the congregation’s response. For a long time, I skipped the moment of “The Lord be with you/and also with you,” before the Lord’s Prayer, because it seemed silly to say both lines myself. Then I got the idea to have people film themselves saying, “And also with you,” and my son helped me put all the videos together, so we have the sense of the community saying it communally. I also eliminated the “suffrages” due to the fact they are meant to be responsive, and there is a long stretch of speech from the reading of the Gospel through the Collects. While worship is not meant to be entertainment, when it is on a screen, it does need some variety between prayers and music, and it is a better experience to have each component be short, oftentimes shorter than we would do in person. My sermons online have also grown shorter, and yet being online has allowed me to be creative and to use visuals like photos and videos in my sermons that I would not have been able to do during in-person worship.

⁵⁰ Hughes, *What Is Good Online Worship in the Episcopal Church?*

⁵¹ Whoever spoke on Zoom would show up on the screen, so everyone had to stay muted.

entirely live and streamed it onto the St. David's Facebook page. This allowed the community to have the experience of worshipping together. However, there were numerous problems with this format.⁵² After three weeks of this, we elected to go to an all-pre-recorded version.⁵³ This allowed for much better sound quality and the ability to edit out mistakes.⁵⁴ It enabled me as the Rector to interact with the congregation during the service, allowing some of the 'phatic communication' described by Zirschky to happen.

Worship on Sundays is followed by Coffee Hour on Zoom. This enables people to see each other and have conversations. However, when 20-30 people are on Zoom together, having one giant conversation is difficult. After a few months, we elected to have fifteen minutes of gathering/large group discussion time, and then used the automatic assigning feature in Zoom to randomly put people in breakout rooms of 3-4 people for 30 minutes. This enabled people to have a deeper conversation with one another (akin to sitting down at a table in the parish hall at coffee hour, except they did not get to select their own table). People really like this format.

Small Group Worship

In the Episcopal Church, the Bishops have been abundantly clear that 'Virtual Communion'⁵⁵ is not a valid sacrament, and will not be authorized. While some people have

⁵² The sound quality was not good, especially for music. And the leaders on Zoom could not worship along, as there would be feedback and a lag if they tried to watch the service. We also had incidents of clocks going off while people were reading prayers, problems with Facebook, or other unplanned interruptions.

⁵³ The running time of most services is 45 minutes, consisting of a 5-minute prelude/welcome, and 40 minutes of the service, including a postlude during which we scroll slides of announcements.

⁵⁴ It also meant we could stream simultaneously on both YouTube (as a premiere) and on Facebook (streamed live).

⁵⁵ Virtual Communion is where the priest says the words of consecration in one location broadcast over the internet and people in their homes consume bread and wine. In Anglican theology, the community gathered is what makes it a valid sacrament, and the priest is supposed to touch the elements in order to consecrate them, and this is not possible to do when not physically gathered.

been happy to fast from the Eucharist to keep people safe,⁵⁶ others have felt a major loss in their spiritual lives. Diocesan Bishops have addressed this in different ways. The Bishop of San Diego encouraged churches to consider a ministry in which Licensed Eucharistic Visitors (LEVs) could bring communion to a small group of ten or fewer people, in a backyard, to pray together and then receive the consecrated host.⁵⁷ Due to the age of our parishioners, our Regather Task Force felt that this model was the best choice for St. David's. A description of this Small Group Worship Ministry is included in Appendix B. This ministry has enabled St. David's parishioners to receive the sacrament without my being there to consecrate the Eucharist for them. The participants have reported they love having the ability to receive communion and be together in a safe way.

Providing Pastoral Care Online

Pastoral care is crucial in a pandemic and needs time and relationship to build trust. Being new to St. David's, and in an online or remote capacity, this is difficult and requires a new approach. The Listening Campaign (described below) was an important first step in getting to know people and letting them know I am here and available to them. As previously stated, sacraments are nearly impossible to do during physical distancing. However, I have prayed with people over the phone and on Zoom before surgeries. Of course, I cannot anoint people through those platforms, but saying the familiar words from the *Book of Common Prayer* brings comfort. Being available for updates through texting when people are in medical crises is important too. I have called people in the hospital numerous times, since visits are not allowed (and I am currently 500 miles away). Sadly, I did give Last Rites over Skype to a parishioner who was

⁵⁶ Rickel, "Owning Our Idoltry."

⁵⁷ Paulsen, "'House Churches' Offer Return to in-Person Worship by Following Practice of Early Christians."

dying due to Covid. It was heartbreaking not to be able to be present with the family, even as I was thankful to be able to see and say the prayers over her.

Even the annual Stewardship Campaign was reimagined with pastoral care in mind. Please see Appendix C for the description of this.

Building Relationships from a Physical Distance

Before the pandemic, I shared with the Vestry that I wanted to launch a “Listening Campaign” as soon as I arrived, with the goal of spending 30 minutes with each parishioner at a coffee shop, in their home, or at my office, getting to know each individual or couple and hearing about their hopes and dreams for St. David’s. This would enable me to hear the movement of the Holy Spirit and set some goals and direction for our life together. The stay-at-home order made meeting in person impossible. Still, I felt it could be successful if people were willing to meet with me either on Zoom or on the phone. Thus, between May 2020-October 2020, I conducted a Listening Campaign virtually. St. David’s members were invited to sign up utilizing “Sign Up Genius”⁵⁸ to facilitate the scheduling. People could select either a Zoom appointment, a phone appointment, or some other method of meeting electronically.⁵⁹ Four people declined due to poor health. 31 households did not respond to the email invitation or phone invitation.

Ultimately, I interviewed 74 members, comprising nearly 60% of the active parish membership.

During each interview, I asked four questions: 1) Tell me about yourself. 2) What brought you to St. David’s? 3) What keeps you at St. David’s? and 4) What are your hopes and dreams for our church? Not everyone answered every question; still, there were some important

⁵⁸ www.signupgenius.com

⁵⁹ In August, my Parish Administrator sent emails to those I had not yet met with inviting them to sign up, which yielded more appointments. In late September, she and a volunteer called the remaining people to invite them to sign up.

common threads tying the narratives and answers together. I shared the demographic information in the Introduction of this paper to describe the broader context. Here, I will focus on the dynamics of the church community, which help me not only to know who the people are, but where the church is being called by the Holy Spirit in terms of ministry and opportunities.

What drew people to St. David's and keeps them there? Many reported it is the people: they find one another "loving," "friendly," "welcoming," and "nice." The atmosphere was frequently described as "open," and "relaxed." People called it a "family friendly" church, even though there are not many children now, but several recalled times in the past when the Sunday School program was "bursting." Multiple people stated St. David's "is my family," and that "my friends are there." In terms of worship and music, people reported liking the liturgy and the blended service style. Several noted they like having a woman rector again. Music was particularly important to many people; they like the music director and the choir. Programs and outreach⁶⁰ are central to the life of the church. Cursillo and Daughters of the King were the most mentioned ministry programs. Sunday School, lectures (Adult Forums), Stewardship, Hospitality, and the Preschool were also important. Fewer mentioned potlucks and bible study.

Conversely, while not directly asked about this, people also shared their concerns. Stories about the conflicts that have plagued this congregation poured forth. People described severe conflict with clergy and other parishioners, which has contributed to a very toxic and unhealthy environment for more than a decade. For more on this, please see Appendix D.

What are their hopes and dreams? The most often reported dream was that more children and families would join the church and the Sunday School will return to prior activity levels.

⁶⁰ Outreach was frequently discussed, as people reported they like to volunteer and find it important to help others. Six people mentioned the Food Pantry as being important, others talked about the Interfaith Shelter, Rachel's Center, and the shoe drive.

People would like to see a better marketing and a social media presence. They want outreach and volunteer opportunities to continue. Several people wondered why there are not more opportunities for fellowship and fun? People want more buy-in from people on programs and ministries, that is, more people to be involved to spread the work around. Some want to see drastic changes, especially coming out of the pandemic, others want things to ‘return to normal,’ or go back to what was before. It is clear they would like a future with less conflict, more stability, a financially secure outlook, and a unity in direction and purpose. Multiple people voiced a desire for one clear direction and for everyone to be unified around it, with a dedicated leader to guide them to it.

What About the Property?

One unique aspect to my situation is that St. David’s has a property with which I am largely unfamiliar. Luckily, strong and engaged lay leaders and the staff have taken extra responsibility for caring for the property through this time. During the pandemic, only the Preschool and Food Pantry ministries took place on the church campus. For more details on how the Preschool and Food Pantry ministries were adjusted to covid protocols on campus, please see Appendix E. Throughout the pandemic, the Sanctuary is the only building that has been largely unused. The Lenten paraments from 2020 are still hanging a year later. The Music Director has filmed a few organ pieces in there, but otherwise the building is desolate. This is a great source of grief for some in the congregation. Because I have practically no experience with or connection to the building, I do not find myself thinking about it, except when a parishioner expresses concern. I did ask that any baked bread and wine that is in the reserve be returned to nature, but I think it is important to keep some consecrated wafers reserved and the Presence

Light burning. It is at least symbolic that Jesus is still with us in that space, and while the building may be closed for the health and safety of all, St. David's community continues to gather – online.

Ministering to the Literally Dis-Connected

Because we have an older congregation, there are parishioners that do not have access to the internet. Before I became Rector, the Senior Warden organized a phone tree ministry called “Care Callers,” which linked every person in our directory and all of the Preschool teachers and families with a St. David's member who would call to touch base with them periodically. Utilizing the Care Callers, we were able to learn who did not have access to technology and how we might keep them connected, in addition to the calls. We offered to burn DVDs of the weekly service, and three families accepted that offer. There were three families that did not have a DVD player; thus, the Parish Administrator prints out the bulletin and my sermon and mails it to them each week.

The reality of the rector not being there physically has been pointed to as a major stumbling block for people who do not have access to technology. However, even had I lived in San Diego, regulations would have prevented me from doing in person visits. Some clergy, when cases were low, were able to meet with people outdoors and distanced. That is something I cannot do from 500 miles away. I have made phone calls to people who I know do not have internet access more regularly, and when parishioners have expressed concern for one of these folks, I have reached out to them on the phone. It has been difficult to be new and not have prior relationships with people, as when I call, they do not always know who I am.⁶¹

⁶¹ One elderly woman believed that someone had called her who was pretending to be the rector (it really was me), and she immediately called another parishioner quite concerned after we hung up.

Virtual Ministry Successes and Challenges

Being a Virtual Rector is difficult but worthwhile. It is difficult because we are in a global pandemic and it is an uncertain time. Nevertheless, we have been able to do an incredible amount of ministry together across the miles. One parishioner states she has felt more ministered to by me than she has from any priest before, and I am 500 miles away. That is flattering, and points to the relative success of this ministry model. Being truly present, even online, is the key. It is still a ministry of presence, as George describes it. Yet, it is also true that being online is not necessarily a two-way interaction. When I lead worship, I stare at a round dot on the border of my computer screen, not my parishioner's faces. They see me each week, but if they do not log on to Coffee Hour or participate in some other Zoom meeting, I do not get to see their faces. Still, for those who do interact on Zoom, it is amazing how much connection and relationship building (and sustaining) can happen there.

One parishioner likened this Virtual Rector ministry arrangement to a long-distance relationship. Romantic implications aside, there is a way in which that comparison is accurate. When one is separated from a friend or partner, it takes a great deal of intentionality and time to stay in relationship across the miles. That is likewise true in this ministry. Having those moments through the week to remind the community, 'I'm here' and 'I'm thinking of and praying for you,' become more crucial. Excellent communication is imperative. Sharing what we are each working on, discussing challenges and concerns openly, being honest – all become crucial not only to build trust but to make it possible to be in a ministry relationship like this. Indeed, as Thompson eloquently argued, this is not dissimilar to Paul's ministry through the Epistles. Unlike Paul, I can easily and instantly connect with my parishioners in real time, and

that makes a big difference. Reminding my parishioners that we are not the first to be in a long-distance ministry relationship seems to have helped them too. Episcopalians value tradition and scripture and knowing there is precedence for this model of ministry in the earliest church is gratifying, even if we are utilizing new technology and what feels like futuristic methods to accomplish it.

While St. David's and I did not choose this model of ministry, we have learned much in the process. For others attempting a ministry like this, I would recommend laying out expectations of what is possible to accomplish across the miles in advance: worship, programming, pastoral care, leadership, and fellowship. Having well defined roles for those who are 'on the ground' is key. Who manages the property (if there is one)? Who coordinates administrative tasks? How often do leaders need to meet to stay informed? What are the best platforms to use?⁶² Indeed, St. David's may be unique in that they have essentially been self-sustaining for over a decade. There has been a revolving door of rectors and priests-in-charges, and due to this the laity has taken strong leadership in the maintenance of the property, programs, and even pastoral care. I am certain that the strength of those systems has made our virtual ministry more possible and even more successful than it might have been had those patterns not already been in place. They are used to caring for the property and each other.

Nearly a year later, we have settled into this style of ministry. We know one another in ways that feel incarnational. I have come to know the people in the same ways or perhaps even deeper ways than I would if I were there physically. Utilizing the 'third space' of the internet, platforms of Zoom, Facebook, YouTube, and email, we have built relationships, shared joys and

⁶² For example, the Parish Administrator and I use the chat function in Skype throughout the workday because we were being overwhelmed with one sentence emails back and forth. We also agreed that we would only use texting through our phones during off hours and only if it was an emergency that needed immediate response.

challenges, looked into each other's eyes, and prayed together. While I have not yet shared sacramental communion with St. David's, I still feel that we are joined in the mystical communion of the Body of Christ – 'in real life.' Through coming to know and care for one another, God's love connects, calls, and enables us to do ministry together daily. I am the Rector of St. David's in every meaningful and practical way, even though I cannot say where the bathroom is on the physical campus. Ministry is always first and foremost about relationships, and the pandemic has showed that we can have deep relationships and build community that is very real, incarnational, and present, even when we are physically separated.

Scholars who have argued the church can and should be present online were correct. And now that the church is there, we must stay there. They did not foresee a global pandemic that would make in person gatherings unsafe as the catalyst to push the church onto the internet, but their arguments for the legitimacy of doing worship and building Christian community online are largely accurate in practice. Virtual Ministry likely will not replace brick-and-mortar churches. Post-pandemic, many will want to return to in person worship and events. But many may not. And there are now entirely new avenues to explore utilizing the resources available in the virtual world to reach new people and to expand our understanding of community. Thus, financially stable congregations will need to find a way to do both online and ministry in person. My experience proves that Virtual Rectorship is possible, and can be successful, which opens up possibilities not only for the many small churches that cannot afford clergy salary packages, or those who do not have clergy nearby, but also opens possibilities for new entirely digital communities that may serve busy young adults, or homebound seniors, or a multigenerational, geographically diverse population.

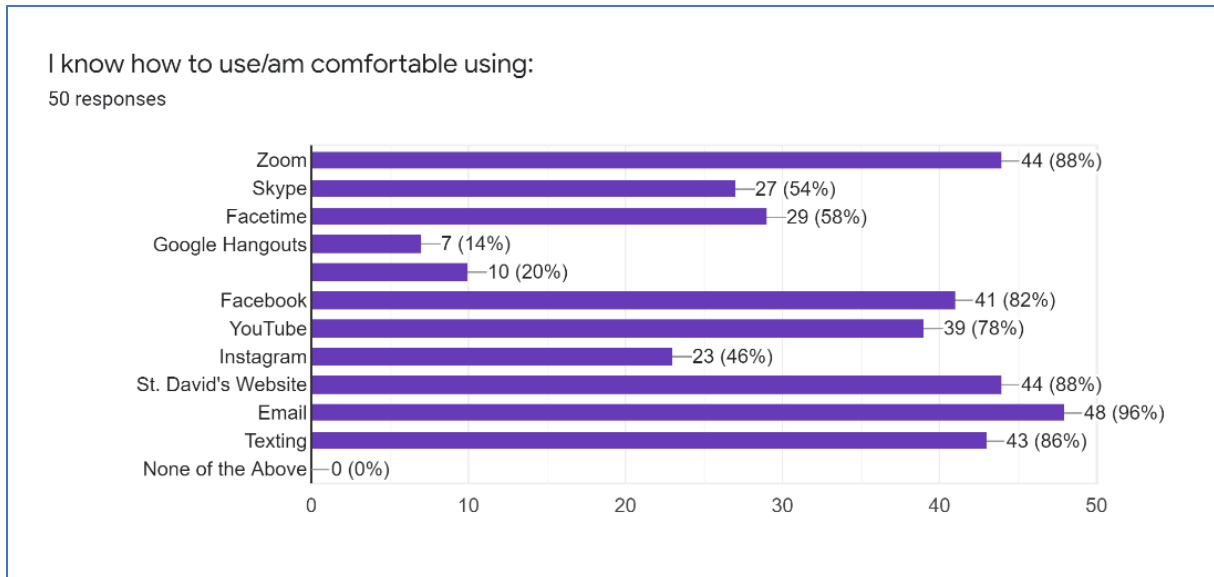
Conclusion

While there is no question that when the pandemic ends, the world will be different and some of the new ways of living by and through technology may stick, some things will revert or go away completely, and some things will be new and different. Being a Virtual Rector has allowed me to form a very different relationship with the people of St. David's, and I believe this is a model of ministry that could be replicated and improved in the post-pandemic era. As people are now more comfortable with technology, and clergy and churches are too, new possibilities will be opened for ministering to people across the miles. This is not just about serving or reaching young people, as scholars and clergy previously thought digital ministry would primarily accomplish. This is about reaching *all* people and connecting those who cannot access worship or spiritual connection where they are, for any number of reasons. It also allows people from diverse and far-flung places to be in relationship with one another and with God, and, importantly, a way to practice compassion and care in a time of intense loneliness. Thus, it changes how we might define community and what a church is and looks like. We have often said the church is not the building. Virtual Ministry puts that claim into practice in ways we have not confronted before. Yet, in the final analysis, this is an ancient way of being the church, using technology to connect to one another and to Christ, for pastoral leadership, and spiritual formation, all from afar, embodied but present in spirit, across the miles, and yet as near as the face looking back at you on the screen. It is the future of ministry and the way we can continue to provide ministry to and expand the body of Christ.

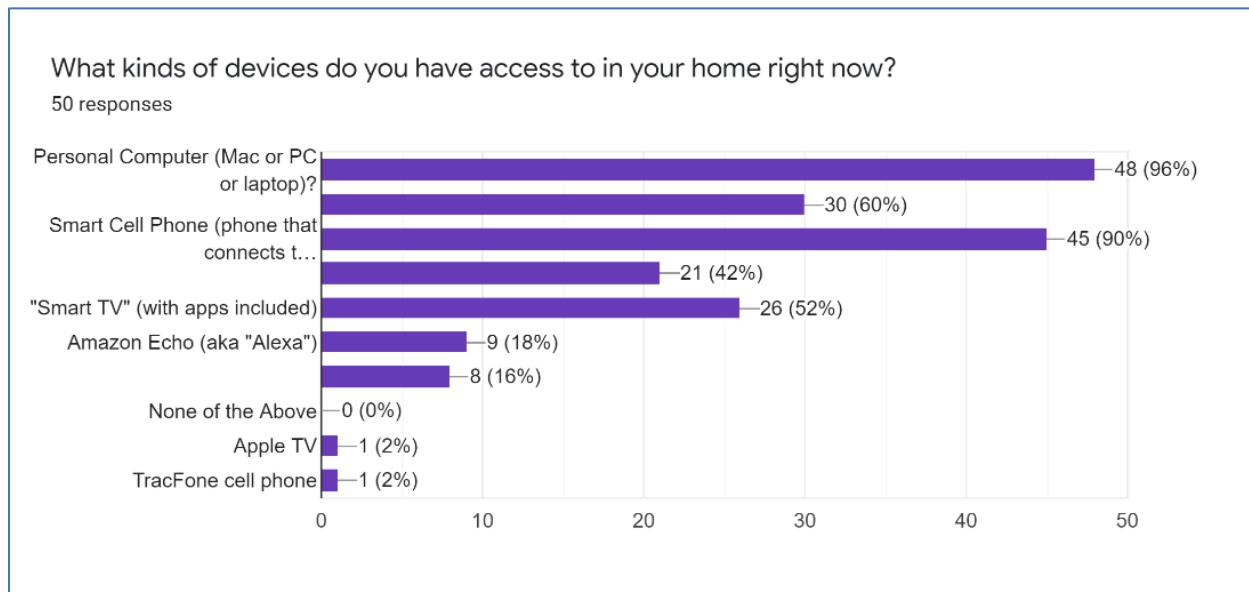
Appendix A – Responses to “St. David’s Virtual Programming Survey”

Fifty people responded, which represents just under half of the active membership.

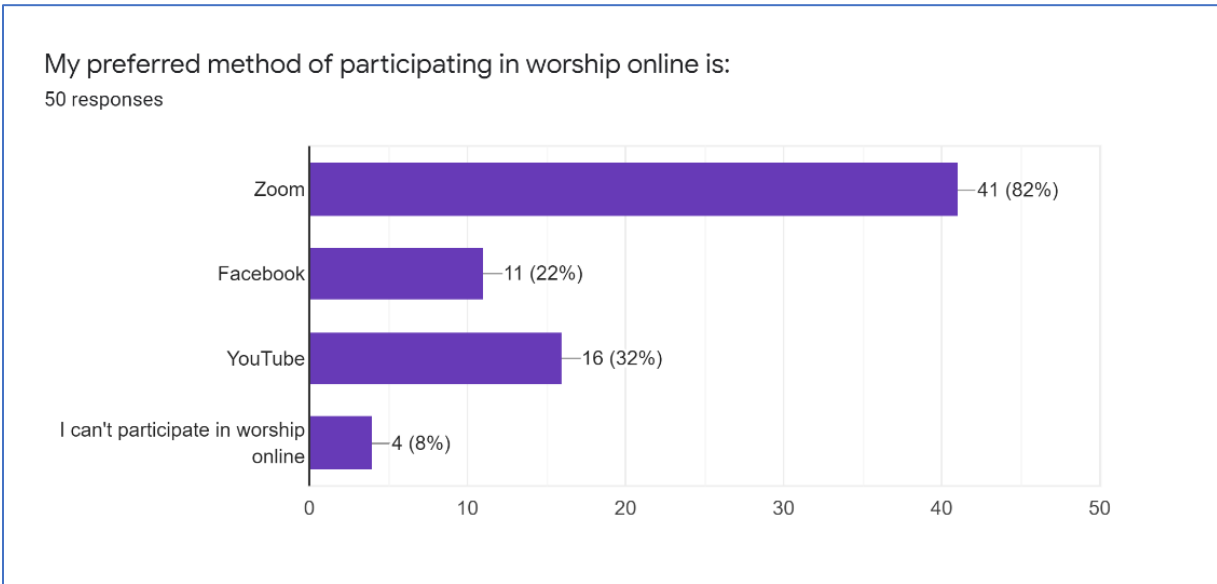
Most of the respondents indicated they are comfortable with email, the website, Zoom, texting, and Facebook.



Nearly all of the respondents have a computer and smart cell phone.



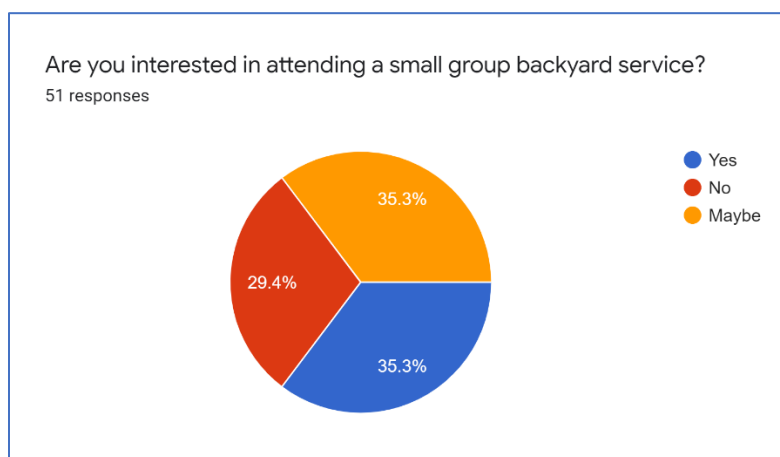
Most wanted to continue having worship on Zoom, and four people said they would not worship online.



54% said either yes or maybe interested in Morning Prayer mid-week. 50% responded that way for Evening Prayer and Compline. 52% were interested in Bible Study, 54% in spiritual or prayer practices, 62% in a book group, 72% in a movie watch party, 86% in a virtual game night.

Appendix B: Small Group Worship Ministry Description

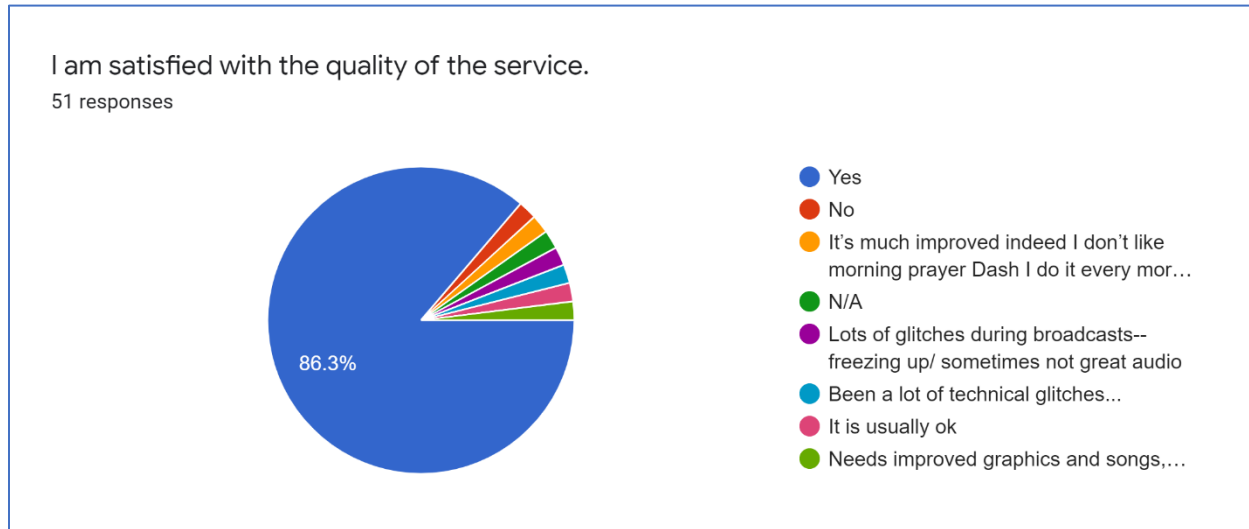
Because I was not living in San Diego, holding any kind of service on the church grounds was not possible (assistant clergy are all over 65 years old, or have significant medical issues, and I felt strongly that for the health of the community and to reinforce that they do have a Rector now, who cannot be there due to the financial crisis, it was important to keep that boundary in place). The Bishop recommended I reach out to local clergy colleagues, to see if when they regathered for in person Eucharist services, if they would be willing to consecrate



some 'extra' host for St. David's LEVs. This would entail that our LEVs attend services at other churches, which they were all willing to do. Many local colleagues were eager to help.

Thus, we had seven LEVs attend the Diocesan Small Group Eucharistic Visitor Training, and then launched another survey to determine the congregation's interest in attending a backyard service. Out of 51 responses, 70% of respondents replied yes or maybe they were interested in attending a back yard service. We also took this opportunity to hear how people felt about the

online services. 86% responded they are satisfied with the quality of the online services.



I then designed a Google Form to allow people to sign up for the Small Group Worship.

It asked for their names, ages, and any children or grandchildren that would want to attend. It

Record of Small Group Eucharist
* Required

LEV's Name *

Your answer

Location (Address) *

Your answer

Date *

Date
mm/dd/yyyy

Time *

Time
: AM

Liturgy used (i.e. Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer, etc.)

Your answer

Next

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also asked about their Covid risk assessment, surveying how often they leave home, if they work in the community, if they have children living with them, etc. It asked for their geographical location (neighborhood), as well as any preferences for who they might like to be grouped with (choir members, Daughters of the King, Cursillo, etc.). From there, several lay people who are familiar with the parishioners and the neighborhoods helped me organize the groups. All

participants had to sign waivers that are kept on file at the church, and they had to agree to stay masked and physically distant at all times, to bring their own chairs, no singing, and to meet for a half an hour or less. The groups were free to decide how they wanted to pray together (using the Daily Office or the liturgy provided by the Diocese). They also could decide when they would meet, monthly was the goal but they could choose to meet more often if they wished. Then the

LEV was responsible for logging the service, again using a Google Form. People reported they enjoyed being able to see one another face to face, and receiving the Eucharist brought great comfort. There were some who felt it was unsafe for them to gather even in that environment. When cases skyrocketed in December, the Bishop asked all in person worship to cease once again, and so our Small Group ministry paused as well.

Appendix C: Stewardship Campaign as Pastoral Care

We specifically envisioned a Stewardship Campaign that would attend to the community's needs during this time of distancing. We created gift bags utilizing specially printed reusable "St. David's bags" that included a candle that everyone could light during our online services and to encourage them to create an altar or sacred space within their home, a refrigerator magnet with our online service times, an invitation to read Barbara Brown Taylor's *An Altar in the World*, a booklet of matches, a pledge card, and a letter from me inviting them into the campaign and to consider making their 2021 pledge. We recruited volunteers to hand deliver the bags to over 70 households. This enabled some contactless, masked, face-to-face contact, which boosted morale and helped people to feel connected and cared for. I made it a point to light the candle for a few weeks during our online service to emphasize that point of connection.

Appendix D: Listening Campaign Further Results

The descriptions of conflict people shared include accounts of contentious Vestry meetings, causing people to declare they will never be on the Vestry again, as well as very harmful words used like name calling and yelling. Several people indicated they knew about the conflicts but chose to “stay out of it,” often explaining they do not like to take sides. One commented they have had “priests who have done irreparable harm to the parish,” while someone else reflected, “in twelve years there have been five priests, and it is only partly their fault.”

Other concerns revolve around people deeply wanting young children and families back at church, also young adults, and even middle-aged adults. Yet, there were also a number of people who indicated they do not want the church to grow, and simply want more focus on those who are there currently. Another concern that spanned numerous conversations was the fear they are doing too much. Considering a shrinking, aging congregation, people noted that there just are not enough people to do everything, and the same handful of people do the bulk of the work. Several people worried about burnout. One person said she likes ushering but because she is always asked to do it, she had stopped coming to church. “I just want to worship,” she confided. The Food Pantry ministry was a source of conflict as well. While many people appreciate it, there were also people who reported great concern with how it is run and how it impacts the parish and the property. Some also saw a noticeable lack of caring for the clients and felt that there was a notable separation between the Food Pantry ministry and the congregation.

A ‘shadow side’ of the parish also emerged. One related that visitors feel smothered and too overwhelmed by people there. Another noted that people there are opinionated, and that causes conflict. Another added that conflict is part of life, but people at St. David’s do not know how to disagree without it becoming a fight. As one person put it: “A level one or two conflict quickly goes to a five!” Another wondered why the parish continues to make bad decisions, and concluded it is due to rampant misinformation and manipulation of information. The rumor mill is potent there as it is in many communities. “Loose lips sink ships – it’s a problem at St. David’s!” I was told. Others noted parishioners do not collaborate well, and that they are used to doing things on their own without asking permission.⁶³ Another member put it this way: “We have a lot of chiefs and not a lot of Indians... Clergy can be pulled in several directions by very vocal, strong-willed people. Most people want to avoid controversy.”

⁶³ Indeed, and I would add to that that several of the conflicts involved a small group of members who did actively collaborate to get rid of clergy who challenged them or would say no to whatever their pet project was, and they became skilled at stirring conflict to precipitate a crisis and cause clergy to leave. It’s classic “clergy-killing behavior.”

Appendix E: Preschool and Food Pantry Operations During Covid

During the pandemic, the Bishop has asked clergy to work remotely and have staff do the same as much as possible. Thus, the church campus is meant to be largely dark during this time. However, the Parish Administrator prefers to work in the office due to needing to access the equipment and files that are there. St. David's Preschool, which shut down in March 2020, but with a PPP Loan was able to reconstitute itself in accordance with the Covid-19 protocols, reopened in July 2020. This was crucial in helping to get the church's finances back on track. However, the classrooms in the Ed Center were deemed too small by covid-standards, so the decision was made to move two of the Preschool classes into the Mission Center. This means that building cannot be used for any other reason, and in fact, only Preschool teachers, and children (not parents, volunteers, or parishioners) can even enter the building. Thus, the Food Pantry ministry could no longer use the kitchen in there to store food, and so we had to secure funding to purchase more refrigerators for the Food Pantry room in the Ed Center. The Preschool also had to convert the Outdoor Labyrinth into a play yard space in order to have separate outdoor spaces for each class of children, which means this space can no longer be used for any other purpose.

The Food Pantry ministry continued its weekly distribution of food using a 'store salvage' model, in which all the food distributed comes from local stores and is 'past date.' Thus, it was all fresh fruits, vegetables, dairy, meats, and breads. They had a model that allowed clients to select their food, grocery-store experience style. The leaders of the ministry felt that this allowed the clients to retain their dignity, and then they would only take the food they wanted. However, this model was no longer safe to do during the pandemic. I secured a grant

from the Diocese to purchase tables and pop-up canopies to move distribution onto the grassy quad. This enabled the line to move through faster and kept the clients and volunteers largely outdoors. However, in November of 2020, we had a Covid outbreak among the volunteers, which caused the Food Pantry to close for two weeks. The Vestry elected at that point to keep the Food Pantry closed. The San Diego Health Department informed me that this ministry would be difficult to do safely, as having the volunteers in the small room together gleaning and sorting the food for hours in preparation for the distribution was inherently unsafe, and outbreaks would continue to occur. They also urged us to move to a drive through style of distribution. The pausing of the Food Pantry has allowed the church to reevaluate this ministry and determine if they are called to continue it, or if there are other possible uses for that space (i.e., expanding the Preschool ministry to infants and toddlers).

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