



STAYING CONNECTED

Where to beyond live-streaming?

Keeping parish communities dynamic during the COVID-19 outbreak

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So all of a sudden you're online like you've never been before. You are live-streaming or recording Masses, and/or you are providing links to other Masses and prayer resources for your parishioners. But there's a long road ahead, and no one knows exactly where all of this might land when the pandemic is over. How can you optimise your digital engagement now and sow the seeds of a more intentional digital presence in the future?

Like a tin of paint, online presence is all about the application. Paint is not much use in the tin. Similarly, online initiatives are not much use if they stay there. Only when paint ends up on a wall does it fulfil its true purpose. An online presence is only ministry if it leads to encounter, conversion, sacrament reception and transformed lives in the real world.

Here are some pointers to help you be more intentional about engaging—and evangelising—in the midst of crisis.

1. FIND OUT ABOUT YOUR PEOPLE

Like onions, our parishes consist of 'layers' of people:

- leadership: parish priests, staff, key volunteers
- congregation: Masses and groups
- households: families, young adults, older adults.

A large portion of the people in our middle 'congregation' layer are habitual Catholics who attend Mass most weeks and have little other engagement with parish life. As parish leadership, you will be missing interacting and living among this group, and you will be wondering, 'Where are my people? Are they well? Are they engaging with us online? Are they praying, serving and connecting with each other?'

It's hard to plan your engagement strategy if you don't know what your parishioners are experiencing. Barna is a respected provider of tools for measuring parishioner engagement. During the pandemic, Barna have collaborated with the online platform Gloop to offer parishes a free measurement tool that allows you to poll your leaders and congregation in order to make more targeted pastoral decisions. You can access the free tool [here](#). Or you could adapt [this example of a congregational survey](#) for your own parish and deliver it on a platform like Survey Monkey.

2. AIM FOR ENGAGEMENT

You've probably heard talk of 'views' of videos and live-stream Masses. Many parishes are seeing digital attendance numbers far higher than their usual physical attendance numbers. That's amazing and very encouraging.

However, views are far less valuable than *engagement*. Viewers will eventually click away unless they begin to participate and become engagers. We need to *intentionally* move our online congregations from viewers to engagers, who are more likely to return and to dig deeper.

Here are some ideas to engage:

- Share your vision for your parish during this time. What are you doing? Who are you reaching? How can people connect?
 - Communicate frequently, over a number of channels (website, Facebook, email, bulletins, mail) about what the parish is doing during the pandemic. Even people who are regulars may be unaware of what is happening.
 - Provide details (both phone and digital) for people to make contact with you across all your channels.
 - Capture email addresses and follow up regularly with invitations to engage more deeply.
 - Ask your viewers to leave prayer requests on your site before and during the Mass.
 - Have your team available before, during and after Mass to respond to comments and pray with people.
 - During your homily, ask a question for your viewers to engage with on the 'chat' function on YouTube or Facebook—for example, 'What is Jesus calling you to do this week?' Then:
 - ~ follow your Mass with a time of online comments and responses to the question
 - ~ have the priest come back onto the live-stream after Mass to facilitate discussion and greet people who are using the chat.
- See an example [here](#) of a Mass with an active chat feed on the side, slides of all prayers on screen during Mass, and the celebrating priest remaining afterwards to engage. (It's messy, but real.)
- Get viewers to fill out a digital welcome card and follow up with them personally.
 - Challenge people to do something in response to the homily and/or readings, not just watch something on their screens.

3. DIG DEEPER

Your website, prayer and reflection resources, and online Masses are a front door—a big one—into your parish community. This is true, not just during this time of COVID-19, but in our whole twenty-first-century life. Our church buildings, when open, house our people for just an hour or two a week. The online world connects people from their homes, workplaces and communities for a significant portion of the other 167 hours. Use your online presence to invite people through your front door and deeper into faith and the life of your community.

To dig deeper:

- **evangelise.** Invite 'searchers' who are viewing online to venture deeper into the life of your parish. The pandemic is a significant evangelising opportunity in the life of your parish. Maximise it!
 - ~ Equip your parishioners to have significant 'faith' conversations with their friends and family.
 - ~ Invite people to connect with you and/or your team by giving phone numbers and email addresses for people to make personal contact.
 - ~ Run events especially for 'seekers and explorers', such as Alpha online (download free resources [here](#)), or run online 'meet your parish priest' or 'ask anything' sessions.
 - ~ Encourage your parishioners to use their digital networks to 'share' and invite people to Alpha and other seeker sessions.
- **launch virtual small groups.** Zoom is a great platform for this. Many people in your parish will have a lot of extra time they are wanting to fill. If you don't know how to use Zoom, you can find a great package of resources to help you get started [here](#). Ideas include:
 - ~ Scripture studies (e.g. [CaFE](#), [Little Rock](#), [Word on Fire](#))
 - ~ catechetical studies (e.g. [The Prayer Course](#), [Catholicism](#), [Formed](#), faith-sharing groups (e.g. [Faith Circles](#), [Alive!](#))).

4. SERVE

It's been a tough season for priests and their parishes as they try to help people struggling physically and financially, while observing gathering restrictions. Identify problems the pandemic is causing in your community and find ways to respond.

Some ways that parishes are serving their communities include:

- putting 'kindness cards' in letterboxes
- delivering groceries and medicines
- offering technical help (with appropriate sanitising precautions) to get older parishioners up and running digitally—research shows that over 85 per cent of older people have a smart phone or iPad
- advertising a parish hotline number to offer a listening ear to those with anxiety, loneliness or young children, and those in self-isolation.
- making care calls, where a team phones every parishioner, asking them:
 - ~ What is a blessing of this time?
 - ~ What is something you are worried about or struggling with?
 - ~ How can we pray for you?
- ministering to families—including children and students—as they experience long days at home by:
 - ~ livestreaming a children's liturgy and music service providing family-friendly prayer resources
 - ~ organising online play dates for particular school classes or children's groups
 - ~ setting up online youth and young adult groups
- starting a prayer shawl ministry, where volunteers make prayer shawls or soft bears to give to those who are alone or ill as a tactile reminder of the parish's care.

The Gospel is not constrained by quarantine, because Jesus is bigger than the coronavirus! God can and is moving powerfully through this time; our challenge is to prayerfully discern where the Holy Spirit is moving and then go there and join in the work. The internet is the new parish front door—and it's a big one. May we open this door wide as we seek to become disciples who make disciples!

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The Archdiocesan Animation Team is available to discuss strategies with you and/or your team, and to facilitate sessions with your team (remotely) on many topics and issues. Just ask!

Contact Lorraine on 0402 217 123, or at lorraine.mccarthy@cam.org.au.

NEXT WEEK: 'The mission-driven parish: Is this really possible?'