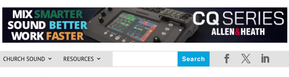

Emergency Fund Key to Expand Reach with Streaming

by Andres Caamano | Administration, Building Health, Streaming

With the unexpected arrival in March of 2020 regarding stay-at-home orders and a few months of no in-person services, the value of a church's emergency fund quickly became apparent.

For churches that hadn't yet begun streaming their worship services, the impact of COVID-19 caused many to make the move.

Bridging The Gap

As churches began to reopen across the country, the need for streaming by churches didn't suddenly diminish. With crowd size regulations ongoing, a return to packed churches are still a ways off.

Therefore, streaming serves a tool to bridge that gap with your current congregation. It also encourages new members to become part of your community, even if virtually at first.

Avoid Thinking Big When Starting To Stream

One challenging aspect for a church seeking to start streaming, is getting caught up on how other churches have been effectively streaming for years. Instead of looking to reach that level of success right out of the chute, "starting simply at first isn't a bad thing," noted Adrian Gates, operations director at Crossroads Community Church in Fitchburg, Massachusetts. "I wouldn't immediately go to doing the most complicated way at first."

George Schulze, video director at Asbury United Methodist Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma, agreed. "Bigger is not always better, in terms of the quality of what you are delivering. God is going to be God, no matter what," he said.

It might be tempting to try to replicate all aspects of a church's worship service when looking to begin streaming. Instead starting small to share the message is a superb starting point.

"When you don't have a lot of funds, and are looking to implement something on short notice, I would begin by replicating one-on-one intimacy" through streaming, said David Leuschner, executive director for Digital Great Commission Ministries. By going that route, a church can avoid 'coming across as unengaging, if they don't have a lot of cameras."

One such way to create such intimacy – while keeping up the level of engagement – might be to incorporate "an acoustic guitar song, after which your pastor does their 20-minute message," added Leuschner. "It might not be what you do during a service, but it helps to engage your (streaming) audience."

Those In The Know On Streaming Can Help

As noted by Schulze, he recalled how a longtime friend and pastor in Grove, Oklahoma, recently approached him about streaming. That small church, numbering about 150 congregants, had previously not streamed.

"The pastor reached out to me, asking how do you do this thing, or how do you put in a camera," said Schulze. "They didn't know how to do Facebook Live and do worship at the same time. It was very confusing for them at first, but they got through it."

Before diving into streaming, it's best to start by finding out what makes a service engaging. By starting small, it might mean streaming using "your cellphone, if you don't have cameras," explained Leuschner. "The trap that people often get caught up in, is trying to replicate what one does for service. For example, like having 30 people up on stage, but there are different routes that are simpler and cheaper."

Emergency Fund Offers Path To Growth

With the changes forced upon churches nationwide recently, it shed light on the value of an adequate emergency fund. Such a fund is key toward implementing significant changes. Particularly for when those changes might not have been on the radar just a few months earlier.

"Having been in ministry and on the integration side, it is crucial to have a leader that is a visionary, that has such a fund for emergencies," said Marcus Hammond, church resource director for Stark Raving Solutions, based in Lenexa, Kansas.

In recent months, Hammond noted a significant uptick in churches approaching him about streaming for the first time. Oftentimes, though, these requests would look at making a significant move toward streaming, without the appropriate investment to best benefit its congregation. "For example, I've seen it where a church about once a week or two is hesitant to spend $20,000 for a (streaming) system that will work well for them for the next 10 years, but instead is scrambling to get something to work. They need the right system, but are only willing to spend about a third of that, expecting the same quality."

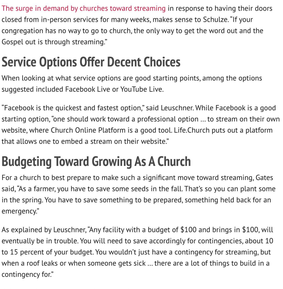

Photo courtesy of DEBBIE KEOUGH

At Water of Life Community Church in Fontana, California, a cameraman works while capturing a worship service being streamed to the church's congregation.

With Streaming Choices, Come Decisions

A wide variety of streaming options is available, so it's easy to think there is a plethora of inexpensive options, to do it well. With the increased demand for desired equipment recently, though, churches envisioning a quick jump toward streaming, often come away disappointed.

"The likes of Blackmagic Design have made it significantly easier for churches to do basic streaming. With the ATEM Mini Pro switcher … everyone on earth wants that," said Hammond. A number of churches have recently called Hammond wanting to add streaming. Their plans sometimes, though, include a desire to buy the Blackmagic switcher … and to begin streaming next Sunday. "We have had to turn down churches that have had such unrealistic budgets and timelines," explained Hammond. "Why? Because the ATEM switcher is backordered for eight weeks."

How Best To Invest When Streaming

When trying to determine which areas are key toward streaming well – or be at risk of bemoaning "you get what you pay for" if one opts for the least expensive option – audio or video were most often cited.

"A bad stream is a camera that does not zoom. Or shows a wide shot of the room, or sounds bad in a mix," said Hammond. "No one wants to watch that." To Gates, he pointed to audio as being the most significant. He noted that, "If you have not invested in sound, people are not willing to listen long, and will quit. They might stay on with a fuzzy camera, but won't have much grace for bad audio."

For Leuschner, his priority pointed toward video, specifically having a quality switcher. The right switcher will provide enough camera angles to make the stream "more engaging. A senior pastor is particularly interested in increasing engagement with the online audience. Having more camera angles, versus a single camera angle" would be very helpful toward that goal, he said.

The surge in demand by churches toward streaming in response to having their doors closed from in-person services for many weeks, makes sense to Schulze. "If your congregation has no way to go to church, the only way to get the word out and the Gospel out is through streaming."

Service Options Offer Decent Choices

When looking at what service options are good starting points, among the options suggested included Facebook Live or YouTube Live.

"Facebook is the quickest and fastest option," said Leuschner. While Facebook is a good starting option, "one should work toward a professional option … to stream on their own website, where Church Online Platform is a good tool. Life.Church puts out a platform that allows one to embed a stream on their website."

Budgeting Toward Growing As A Church

For a church to best prepare to make such a significant move toward streaming, Gates said, "As a farmer, you have to save some seeds in the fall. That's so you can plant some in the spring. You have to save something to be prepared, something held back for an emergency."

As explained by Leuschner, "Any facility with a budget of $100 and brings in $100, will eventually be in trouble. You will need to save accordingly for contingencies, about 10 to 15 percent of your budget. You wouldn't just have a contingency for streaming, but when a roof leaks or when someone gets sick … there are a lot of things to build in a contingency for."

With churches having begun to reopen, there might be some in leadership from churches that have yet to stream, that might come to think the recent rise in demand in streaming was a temporary one.

Gates, though, cautioned falling into such a mindset. Gates noted that "It will be quite a while before we will be able to meet at the same numbers (as before COVID-19). If we don't take various methods to reach the people that won't be returning right away, for the sake of a family member, for example, that would be a step backward. There needs to be the extra effort to reach those people." As Leuschner explained, for many people checking out a new church, they often first visit the church's website, and watch their stream. "If you don't want to stream, it's as if you aren't planning on reaching new people or lost people. If you don't get serious about streaming, you won't grow," he said.

New Demands As Churches Reopen

For some churches, they are discovering as they reopen, what's on their plate is changing. In the case of churches that might have done little with streaming prior to March, only to focus on it the last couple of months, what comes next is a new challenge.

"For those churches that have not been meeting in person, they might have had their pastor streaming through their webcam (the last few months)," said Hammond. "Now (these churches) are scrambling. That's because when they go back to live services next week, they need to be able to broadcast live services. That's usually a multi-camera setup."

With such different needs, churches have often been left to make, "many last-minute emergency calls. These calls are when churches want to set up a (streaming) system for next week." Such a small time window, though, is unworkable for implementing a quality system, he explained.

How things likely will change after churches begin to reopen, and why streaming is so important, revolves around new habits, noted Schulze. "It takes seven or eight times for a person to make something a habit in their life. If a person stays home (for a span of eight weeks), they now are in a new way of thinking. We have to rethink church altogether, and how do we do church?"

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