

Worship in Exile:

THE PERILS AND PROMISE OF VIRTUAL CHURCH

BY TOMPAUL WHEELER

A grey and white cat wanders in front of Malisa's camera. "I think on the prayer front let's add a praise for cats and their existence," One Track Sabbath School class leader, Grace Criteser, announces. "Because that's glorious."

It's Saturday morning, and across the Midwest—and beyond—the Zoom screen is filled with familiar faces. The One Track class is part of the Lincoln New Creation Community Church in Nebraska's capital city, but thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic, its scope has stretched much further. Grace moved away from Lincoln shortly before the pandemic started, but the sudden use of Zoom enabled her to continue enjoying the class she's led for a decade. This morning, Grace asks people whether they've had their first round of COVID vaccines and inquires about a class member's health.

Since its inception, One Track has studied its way through several books of the Bible, including two years in Romans. The group has been studying Isaiah for "a couple years" now and, as of this particular Sabbath, has made it to chapter 40.

"I'm a huge [Handel's] Messiah fan," Grace says. "I want to hear this in the King James Version, because poetry."

The first few verses ring out as some of the most uplifting words ever written. The words "Make straight in the desert a highway for our God" sparks a comment about Nebraskan roads. Verse 5, however, takes a decided

turn—and even reading it in *The Message* doesn't help.

"These people are nothing but grass," Trena Reed reads. "This is a seriously cheery passage of Isaiah."

"Comfort ye my people . . . You're like grass that blows away," Grace recites. "Seriously comforting."

What Now?

The pandemic left congregations scrambling to continue meeting in some form. Many congregations have live-streamed their services on the internet for years now, typically offering a pretty static view of the worship hour. For such churches, the pandemic meant a scaled down version of the same, often with just a sermon beamed out. The most successful churches, however, found new ways to connect and involve people despite the challenges.

"We started off doing some prerecorded services and sermon, with people submitting videos of special music and children's story," says Kristy Hodson, associate pastor of the Stoneham Memorial Adventist Church in Massachusetts. That plan slowly transitioned into a livestream of the sermon to an empty church. In July 2020, the church went to in-person and continued the livestream, often including special music or a children's story. A late-2020 spike in local COVID cases sent them back to a completely online service—live but with prerecorded elements.

Stoneham Memorial conducted an online communion service, distributing prepackaged communion packets in the church parking lot ahead of time. Senior Pastor

Fredy Reinoso officiated at the church, while members gathered on Zoom. “We had time at the end if people wanted to do foot washing with family, with some music playing,” says Hodson. “For singles we suggested they find an opportunity to do service for someone else.”

Response to the socially distanced ritual was overwhelmingly positive. “Some people who hadn’t [otherwise] participated came on. Parents of a church member joined in from Australia and said it was one of the most moving communions they had ever participated in.”

The ability to attend meetings virtually has opened new doors for churches, as seen in Stoneham Memorial’s Wednesday-night Bible study. “When we had it in-person we were maybe getting four people,” says Hodson. “Now it’s 12–15 people and whole families come on, so you’ll have fifth graders, teenagers. It’s really been great seeing the interaction, and now people aren’t facing the back of each other’s heads during the discussion.”

Even as the church has reopened, challenges and differences of opinion have continued. “My father is a transplant patient,” says Hodson. “[My parents] live an hour away and I see them about once a month. In February we started singing again in our church, with the windows closed. And I said, ‘I’m not comfortable with that and I’m not coming. So, I’ll do our chat online when we do our live stream.’ People understand why I’m not going, and I think that helps them feel okay with their own decision. I’ve learned that I’m not going to please everybody. It’s okay for people to be upset at me. Some people were upset that we didn’t have church over the holidays, but [the issue was], ‘We’re in a spike, we’re not going to meet.’”

“When you tap into people’s creativity, you’d be amazed at what people can do,” Hodson says. “That’s how we got our virtual choir. We’ve seen some creative children’s stories, and some different ideas of what church can look like. It’s been great to see people use their creativity on how to connect.”

Rubber Meets Road

“When the Virginia governor said, ‘You can’t meet in person any longer,’ we threw everything up in the air and recreated it,” remembers Dr. Heather Ripley Crews, pastor of the Courthouse Road Adventist Church in



Pastor Heather Crews, Courthouse Road Church

Richmond, Virginia. “Thankfully, I had Lawrence Landa, my media team leader, who already had a dream for what it would be like to stream our services, so we had all the infrastructure. But it’s very different to have an in-person-focused worship service vs. an online one.”

At first, Courthouse Road was restricted to just ten people in the building. “We started having a sermonette, about fifteen minutes, and then a panel discussion with everyone there,” says Crews. “We had a couch up front, and when I watched it later, [I saw that] everyone sunk into the couch. They just disappeared from the camera shot.”

The Courthouse Road team invited members to share videos for scripture reading, offering, or special music. “Nine out of ten people said yes,” says Crews. “A whole bunch of people who wouldn’t normally be open to leading worship were willing because they knew they wouldn’t trip over their words. They could record it as many times as they wanted.”

Streaming over Facebook Live, Courthouse Road has used polleverywhere.com to involve viewers at home. Reflects Crews, “My goal is engagement—not to entertain or be another content-generator, but to engage people in their relationship with Christ.”

What Plays in Peoria

It’s 9:54 on a Sabbath morning, and a fast-paced quiz game through the Kahoot app is running neck and neck between participants HeroElephant, RapidQuail, LivelyFox, DazzledLizard, and WittyGoose. Led by Peoria, Illinois Adventist Church Pastor Matthew Lucio, the game is just the start of over two hours of colorful and engaging Sabbath School and church service.

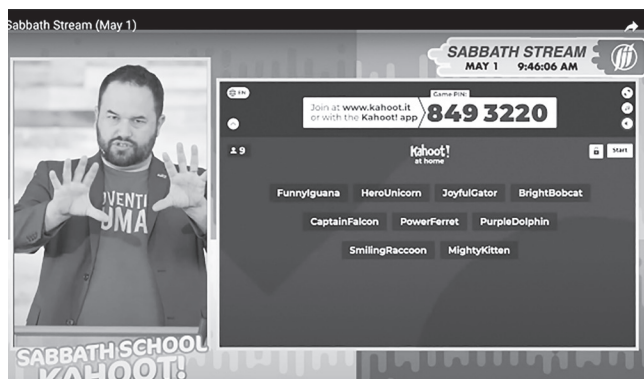
Peoria is a medium-sized congregation in a mid-sized

city, but it aims to “punch above its weight,” with just three people running the sound, streaming, and camera switcher. The congregation decided way back in January 2019 to build a digital church, so they started a YouTube channel with the goal of cultivating community. They started out sharing part of their service but, when the pandemic hit, they started live-streaming everything—with the goal that viewers at home will feel just as involved as anyone in a pew. Viewers from as far as Spain and Australia have tuned in.

Pastor Lucio, known for his far-too-entertaining-for-its-own-good *Adventist History Podcast*,¹ has a vision for where church may be headed. “Technology has eradicated the need to say, well, ‘This church is Peoria, Peoria is your territory,’” he reflects.

You can go online and everything is your territory. There’s no geographical limit. We see ourselves serving both a local and global community. We see a future where a member in Australia can be a member of our church.

It’s also a survival thing. We used to conceive of space like, “We’ve got to send missionaries to China or Ethiopia,” but the digital space is also a space. It’s also a territory that needs missionaries. Maybe by trying to reach the people online—and those tend to be a little more irreverent and funny and whatever—maybe that will change church cultures as well. Maybe if you’re communicating creating memes and whatever, maybe that’ll help the church loosen up a little bit.



Matthew Lucio, Peoria Adventist Church

Many remote attendees find a digital version of church more interactive than the in-person ones they’re used to. “We don’t want the audience to feel like a fly on the wall,” says Lucio. “We encourage people watching online to send questions in. Communication is a two-way street. We change them and they change us.”

The Peoria congregation has created videos and resources showing what it takes to set up online services, and given direct assistance to over a dozen other churches. “It’s unreasonable to expect that the church hierarchy is going to figure this out,” Lucio says. “It’s got to start with local churches doing things. You have a pastor in such a such a place and people grumble and then there’s success and they’re put on the stage and get speaking appointments. This is where R&D happens. I don’t know that it’s going to be us that cracks the code, but I want to see this church thrive and be part of the contributing factors to churches being healthier in the future.”

Connection and Community

Over their sixteen years at Albuquerque Central Adventist Church, Kim and Steve Williams have grown close to the members of their Sabbath School. “We share each other’s burdens,” Kim Williams says. “When COVID happened, we said, ‘What can we do to keep that going?’”

A class member offered to pay for Zoom. “We are the only old people class that’s been Zooming in this whole time,” Williams notes. “We started inviting other people who don’t usually come to our class. Because everyone misses having fellowship, misses talking to another church member. We have some members who, due to health issues, can’t come to church, so we still have Zoom.

“It’s very challenging, even though now the church is opened up,” Williams reflects. “We just sit far away from each other. We can no longer hug each other and say Happy Sabbath. It takes tremendous discipline to stay engaged.”

Laura Wibberding, an adjunct professor at Pacific Union College, loves the opportunity Zoom provides to hear experts and scholars guest-teaching from across the continent. Her family sometimes listens to an East Coast class during breakfast, then logs on to the Choir Room Sabbath School at PUC. Attendance for the Choir Room has roughly doubled with Zoom, and the class is

considering staying virtual as an online ministry, while meeting slightly earlier to facilitate in-person church attendance and planning regular potlucks and face-to-face fellowship.

“It turns out that accessibility is not just beneficial to those with a disability,” says Wibberding. “It really is a gift to everybody.”

Jennifer Jill Schwirzer, director of the Abide Network counseling ministry, started a Sabbath School class on Facebook Live in early 2020. She soon switched to Zoom “so people could see each other,” and eventually from studying the official lessons to a focus on mental health and spirituality.

“It’s talking about depression and anxiety, and how a relationship with God improves our state of mind,” Schwirzer says.

How to deal with shame and cope with anxiety. That has made it more evangelistic than it would have been. I think a lot of people are bringing their friends because they know that the kind of material is going to be relevant and it’s not going to be esoterically Adventist. And people seem to get a lot out of that. And I think it’s some people who aren’t going to church not just because of COVID but for a lot of other reasons—they’re mad or they’re hurt, or burned in some way or the other.

“I do a 25-minute presentation with slides, then we have a 30-minute group discussion,” says Schwirzer. “Then there are a few breakout groups. The breakouts help give people more chance to bond and speak up.” A 90-second time limit for comments ensures everyone has a chance to share and no one monopolizes the discussion. “What I’ve found is that giving ‘permission’ to talk about mental health enables people to bond more deeply and quickly, even in spite of the challenges of technology, because people are talking about what’s happening inside them instead of just about ideas.”

At the Courthouse Road Church, the Sabbath School Joanna Whitaker and Becky Goodermuth lead has faced repeated technical issues. The technological barrier has cut their attendance from 25–30 to an average of 12–17. Their church’s media team has set them up with Meeting

Owl, a video conferencing camera that tracks who’s speaking.

“I have a feeling we’ll continue to have the combo in-person and Zoom,” says Goodermuth. “One of our couples has health issues with her knees, and getting back and forth is uncomfortable. It’s easier for them to use Zoom, so I think that is something we will always want to be available.”

“When I was hit by a car and not able to come for sometime [*sic*], one of my friends used to call so I could listen on the phone,” says Whitaker. “But it would have been wonderful if I could have accessed on Zoom. People get sick and go out of town, but they can still join. We are definitely going to keep using this.”

“Faith &”

When churches started shuttering in March 2020, Andrews University Associate Professor of Mathematics Anthony Bosman had an idea. It’s grown into the Faith & Sabbath School (live on Zoom and archived on YouTube). The class grew to focus on such topics as social justice, politics, and examining scripture, secularism, and science.

“A number of the participants had been somewhat estranged from their local congregation,” Bosman says.

They found it really refreshing to be in a group that engaged on issues they cared about. It was a way to reengage faith. Probably the typical profile [is] graduate students at non-Adventist universities that may have a small local Adventist congregation but that isn’t always able to address these issues.

We’ve typically had a 20–30-minute presentation followed by small group discussion, then come back at the end with a wider discussion. Especially during lockdown when there was so much social distancing, a lot of people [appreciated] a consistent medium for uplifting, encouraging conversations.

Renu

“Are purpose and calling synonymous?”

The Meadow Glade Adventist Church, in Battle Ground, Washington, is closely tied to a local church

school and academy. The dozen participants in this morning's Renu Young Adult class are watching the *Humans of Adventism* documentary series,² digging into the ideas and themes its stories explore.

A class member tells how he studied the Bible and felt like God was calling him to do something, wondering, *does this mean I'm supposed to be a pastor?* "Then I felt like God was telling me to be a teacher, and now I'm a librarian. And I wonder, am I still answering that call to minister? And hopefully I am."

The Renu class, launched in January 2021, has chosen to meet virtually, even as others have begun meeting in person. "I think in some ways our church has struggled emotionally with COVID because everything is so intertwined," says Heather Moor, a filmmaker and audio producer, and wife of Discipleship Pastor Johnny Moor. "Church services were outside in the summer but now they're indoors, spaced out, and everyone's masked."

The Renu class always starts out with a video to spark discussion. "The Portland area has almost 40 Adventist churches, but it's a very secular city," says Moor.

I think a lot of people around here are open to some form of spirituality. We're hipsters, but we're hippies as well. There's potential there, but because Adventism is a traditional kind of worldview, sometimes we have a difficult time having an impactful presence outside of our little bubble. I think a lot of people who maybe grew up Adventist or went to Walla Walla [University] wind up here.

I've noticed with my friends an expression that what we're doing at church doesn't scratch



Alex Portillo, Renu Sabbath School, Meadow Glade Adventist Church

the itch that they have. I think we can be vulnerable with each other and have real crucial conversations. We've been longing for a certain kind of safe conversational space in Adventism for a long time.

Atlasville

"What is your favorite plant?"

Connecting through Microsoft Teams, the adult Sabbath School members of the Atlasville, South Africa Adventist Church, not far from the Johannesburg airport, always start class with an icebreaker question. "Mine is the sunflower," offers Khethiwe Sithole. "Sometimes you'll see one on the side of the road, and you'll wonder where it came from . . ."

Sithole loves the opportunities her virtual class gives to interact. "[There's] more participation," she says. "I love how we get to know people in ways we never would have known during regular church."

The diverse group of members undertakes an in-depth study of the *Adult Bible Study Guide* each week. This week, they're examining God's covenants with Adam and Eve and with Noah. The question is asked, "Why did God need a remnant?"

"I think a remnant is necessary because it carries on the DNA of the original created people," says class member Rene. "We were made to show the galaxies the love of God."

"In order for prophecy to be fulfilled, there has to be a remnant," offers another.

"There is a mission for us to fulfill."

"Are only Adventists part of God's remnant?"

"Membership of a group doesn't get you into heaven. That's the bottom line. You can be an Adventist, you can be an office bearer at any level of the church, and still miss God. Your relationship with God is what determines your final destination. Full stop."

Youth

It can be challenging to get teens to participate in Sabbath School in person. On Zoom, the silence can be deafening.

Middletown Valley, Maryland Adventist Church youth leaders, Jeff and Becky Scoggins, minister to a mixture of public school, Adventist school, and home

school students locally, plus some teens who've joined from afar. They've found that the same approach that works to draw out and involve teens in person works virtually as well—meet them where they are, and treat them like adults.

Becky is usually the first to lead out each week, drawing the youth in through an interactive activity. “She finds ways to get them to jump up and find three things, something to get them moving and to talk about it,” Jeff says. “Becky’s rule is to just start asking them about things they are interested in. *Where are you at? What’s happening in school?* Just helping to draw them out a bit. If you don’t care about the kids themselves, you’re not going to get anywhere.”

At the end of each class, the Scogginses give an art or photo challenge to share the next week. Once a month the class has collaborated to create a video for children’s story, a highlight for church members missing seeing the youth growing up. They’ve also added a Monday-night Bible study for youth interested in more in-depth Bible study.

The youth class is looking forward to meeting in person again, yet hesitant to lose some of the youth who, though long-distance, have nonetheless become part of their group.

Think of the Children

Kellyville, one of Sydney, Australia’s northwestern suburbs, is part of the city’s “Bible belt.” Due to Australia’s strict measures to quash COVID, Kellyville Adventist Church closed in March 2020 and didn’t meet in person again for several months.

“We’re blessed to have a really incredible media team,” says Kellyville member Michelle Bowman. “They immediately started recording music, putting together videos, and broadcasting a prerecorded church service. The Zoom sessions for the kids were a little bit loose and not clearly defined at first, but very quickly they started having videos the team recorded themselves, videos they got from other places, and time to sing together—which is always a bit of a disaster but hilarious.”

The Kellyville church split its children’s Zoom classes into ages 5 and under and 6 to preteen. “What didn’t work for us was more of a coincidence of when it shut down,” says Bowman. “My older daughter had just finished the

previous group at the end of 2019. The Zoom sessions for the older kids were much more of a ‘Let’s sit and do a little Bible study and chat.’ We gave up within a few weeks, because it wasn’t connecting for her as a 6-year-old who had just learned to read. I think that may have been the case for a number of families, because one of the first things to come back in person was that age group.”

Every few weeks, Orchard City Adventist Church Children’s Ministries leader Shannon Gerber makes a Friday-afternoon run to take art supplies to children’s homes, and mails out several boxes as well. Shannon teaches ages 0–6 at the Kelowna, British Columbia church, while her mother, Cherri Gerber, teaches ages 7–12.

“When everything shut down here, we knew that we wanted to be able to continue the connections with the kids,” Shannon says. “We also knew that a lot of children who attend our VBS every year would be interested. Some attend our Adventist school; some are community members. The first week about 25 kids joined us. Then we saw an increasing need as none of the other five area churches had anything online for kids. Now we have about 35 who attend weekly.

“One really pleasant surprise is the way the kids engage differently than they do in-person,” Shannon observes.

There are more kids to bounce off of since it’s a larger group. We’re also seeing kids who attend the Adventist school interacting with those who don’t in a way they might not often otherwise. The kids have been able to build those relationships.

It’s changing the way we plan to restructure Sabbath School when we do go back in person. Our goal is to find ways for the six local churches to work together. We’re hoping to use this to kind of jumpstart the togetherness, rather than all six churches having people burning out trying to do too many things.

“Teaching on Zoom is not awesome,” says Corinne Hamstra, children’s leader at the Detroit Oakwood Adventist Church in Taylor, Michigan. “It can be super-



Oakwood Detroit Church kids' Zoom Sabbath School

challenging, and singing is almost impossible—but we do it anyway because it's a really important part of Sabbath School."

Corinne teaches alongside her sister, Christie Hamstra, engaging an energetic group of kids from toddlers to middle-schoolers. "We have more participation online than we ever did in person," Corinne notes. "Sometimes the kids come in their pajamas and they're eating their cereal, but that's ok. That's why there's mute."

"We've had babies born who've never been to in-person class," says Christie. "We have a couple kids who were old enough to come to class, but it never fit into their parents' Sabbath morning routine—but they're faithful attenders of the Zoom class."

"People are enjoying streaming other people's churches," Christie observes. "It's not going to go back to church as usual. There will always be this sort of hybrid presence. I think people need it. Our thing when we first started was to provide something that was safe for the kids that's specifically for them. Having the interaction—'What'd you do this week?' 'I got a new dog' 'How's your cat?'—Kids thrive on routine. It's definitely my favorite Zoom of the week, I'll tell you that."

Worship in Exile

Back in the One Track class, two new members tune in, live from their car, as the class reads Isaiah 40 in different versions. Grace reads from a commentary and reflects on the participation of non-Israelites in the new Zion—and how God wants everyone to come together and worship Him, no matter their background.

"That's where they'd have said, we may be suffering now, but God made the promises to us," Trena observes. "People in exile may feel like they've been blown away, but

God has still made these promises."

"We live in a world with people who are in charge—or who maybe make policies—who hurt people," says Grace. "You have empires that cause destruction and ravage other nations. Those don't last forever. Israel's exile in Babylon won't last forever either. However, God does."

"We know that we're mortal and we know that we're going to die," says Trena. "But the comforting part is that God will redeem us. A lot of people suffer in this life. Israel's suffering as a nation wouldn't last forever. I wouldn't want to live in this sinful world forever."

"I wouldn't want to take comfort in transientness," says Stuart. "For me it doesn't come across as comforting."

"I disagree," says Randy. "I take great comfort in knowing there's something beyond."

Endnotes

1. <https://adventisthistorypodcast.org/>
2. <https://humansofadventism.com/epk>



TOMPAUL WHEELER is a writer and filmmaker in Nashville, Tennessee.