



Hybrid Ministry

Discerning Next Steps

During the Covid-19 pandemic, many congregations turned to electronic media for their worship, formation, pastoral care, and fellowship. In doing so they met unexpected challenges, but they also found new opportunities for outreach and engagement with the people of God.

As churches return to in-person gatherings, leaders are seeking to decide how (or whether) to begin, discontinue, adapt, or expand their online ministry. This resource provides questions for reflection and discussion as you discern next steps, along with a range of options for hybrid ministry.

Questions for Discernment

These questions may be used for individual reflection or as a starting point for discussion with the session or in other committees of the church.

1. *People.* How do certain modes of ministry (in-person, online, or hybrid) affect our relationships with the people of God? Who do we remember or forget?
 - a. Who has joined us? Where are they coming from?
 - b. Who have we lost? How might we encourage them to return?
 - c. Who seems more engaged during the pandemic, and why?
 - d. Who seems less engaged during the pandemic, and why?
2. *Programs.* How are different forms of ministry conducted in online, in-person, or hybrid environments? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each?
 - a. Worship. How are meeting Jesus Christ in Word and Sacrament?
 - b. Formation. How are we growing as a community of lifelong disciples?
 - c. Pastoral Care. How are we helping to bear one another's burdens?
 - d. Fellowship. How are experiencing the joy of the Spirit in the body of Christ?
3. *Priorities.* Which aspects of the church's mission thrive in online, in-person, or hybrid situations? How have we advanced God's reign? What have we neglected?
 - a. Evangelism. How are we proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ to all?
 - b. Compassion. How are we serving people in need, locally and around the world?
 - c. Justice and Peace. How are we working for equity, dignity, and reconciliation?
 - d. Care of Creation. How are we demonstrating good stewardship of God's gifts?
4. *Capacity.* What capacity does the congregation have for various modes of ministry—on-line and in-person? Is God calling us to cease some activities in order to pursue others?
 - a. Who will attend *in-person activities*: the whole congregation, small groups, or some combination? What are the strengths and weakness of each? Who will be responsible: staff, volunteers, or both? Will new staff or training be required?
 - b. How will *on-line events* be produced: live-streaming, prerecorded, or some combination? What are the strengths and weakness of each? Who will be responsible: staff, volunteers, or both? Will new staff or training be needed?
 - c. How will pastoral care be provided, particularly for those who participate primarily or exclusively through electronic media? Who will provide that care: deacons, elders, or ministers? Will they be able to take on new responsibilities?

- d. How will new leaders and volunteers be identified, empowered, and equipped for these roles? What other resources (financial, technological, educational, professional, etc.) may be needed for new modes of ministry?

Possible Paths Forward

The range of options described here is intended generate reflection and encourage discussion as congregations and leaders determine next steps.

1. *In-person only.* For a variety of reasons, some churches and leaders may choose to focus on in-person ministry. The decision may stem from the availability of resources (finances, technology, or personnel), or it may arise from the desire to serve a particular population (whether less tech-savvy or weary of screens). Here it will be important to remember the variety of gifts in the body of Christ, perhaps helping online participants to connect with a more suitable community in the presbytery or beyond.
2. *Online only.* Other churches and leaders may have found their calling in online ministry, choosing to concentrate in this arena. Such communities will need to think carefully about new understandings of the church and discipleship, particularly in relation the sacraments, ordination, marriage, and funerals. Again, relationships in the connectional church will be an important resource. It may be helpful at times to collaborate with other churches and pastors in order to extend in-person pastoral care.
3. *All hybrid, all the time.* In the interest of full participation and inclusion, some churches and leaders may strive towards online *and* in-person meetings at every opportunity— worship, formation, fellowship, and service. These communities will need to be especially cautious about burnout for leaders. As such gatherings may promote or inhibit certain forms of engagement, they will need to remember that in-person and online participants may be having very different experiences of church.
4. *Blended hybrid ministry.* Many congregations will want to implement a “blended hybrid” approach, offering some events online, some in-person, and some in both formats (whether simultaneously or asynchronously). To name a few examples:
 - a. an in-person Sunday morning service and an online or hybrid midweek or evening service of prayer;
 - b. a hybrid Sunday morning service with the extended service of communion for homebound or hospitalized members;
 - c. in-person educational opportunities for children and online discipleship formation events for adults;
 - d. in-person choir or handbell rehearsals for more experienced musicians and online music classes for those who are less confident;
 - e. an outdoor sports activity or picnic for some participants and an online coffee hour for others;
 - f. a neighborhood service project to alleviate immediate needs and an online letter campaign to address root causes.

There are countless variations. These communities will need to think carefully about which forms of ministry and aspects of mission are most conducive to which forms of gathering, how to sustain relationships among different constituencies in the congregation, and how deacons, ruling elders, and other members might share in leadership for these forms of ministry.

