

Zoom Shabbat, drive-through confessional: Faith during coronavirus

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A phone is used to livestream a Eucharistic Adoration service at Saint Ann Catholic Church in Washington, D.C., on March 29, 2020. The Archdiocese of Washington has temporarily halted all public Masses and gatherings in an effort to contain the spread of the coronavirus. Photo: Carolyn Kaster/AP Photo

Corey Bassett-Tirrell is a Catholic priest. He was shocked to see the line of cars in the parking lot of St. Mary's Church in Chelmsford, Massachusetts. They waited for his church's first-ever drive-through confessional.

Catholics practice the tradition of confession. Churchgoers admit their sins to a priest, their church's leader. By doing so, people receive forgiveness and a blessing.

Bassett-Tirrell sat on a chair surrounded by orange traffic cones to keep a safe distance of 6 feet. From there, the priest offered the chance for drive-through confession.

Due to the spread of the coronavirus, the United States is now practicing social distancing. Community gatherings have stopped across the country. Many places of worship have stopped all physical gatherings for now, too. They had to find other ways to pray and worship.

For Roman Catholic churches, this includes the celebration of the Mass. Mass is the central act of worship for Catholics. Mosques, a Muslim place of worship, and synagogues, a Jewish place of worship, have also been forced to find other forms of gathering for worship.

Bassett-Tirrell's church is prepared to livestream regular worship services. It had already offered social media options for people who could not come in person. Bassett-Tirrell says these technologies cannot replace some essential traditions of Catholic worship. Many traditions require people to be present.

The vast majority of worship communities have turned to technology. Some are streaming religious services online or having video conferences.

"I see this as a great opportunity — though a difficult one," says Bassett-Tirrell.

"My prayer is that people will come back to the altar at a time when it's safe again, and have a deeper understanding," he said.

For many, the lack of community and physical traditions have brought up important questions about religion and spirituality.

If It's Online, Is It Jumu'ah?

Selaedin Maksut is a religious scholar from New Jersey. He is also a leader in the Muslim community. Maksut said Muslims have had to decide whether to stop the tradition of Friday prayer service. Friday prayer is an obligation written in the Qur'an. It is part of the social lives of American Muslim communities. Maksut said not having Friday prayer would be serious.

The week of March 16, the coronavirus was spreading fast in U.S. Muslim communities in New York and New Jersey and people were stressed, Maksut said. The community tried to decide on March 19 whether or not to stop Friday prayer services.

The main day of worship for Muslims is called Jumu'ah. Muslim men must do this prayer service. Maksut said leaders were having a conversation about streaming the service on Facebook so people could participate from home.

Maksut said a group of scholars decided the tradition of Jumu'ah must be with other people. An online sermon would not count. The importance of Jumu'ah comes from the physical gathering of people.

Still, in the Muslim religion, Maksut and others say that saving human life is more important than all other religious duties.

Shabbat Via Zoom

On March 20, the Jewish synagogue Temple Beth O'r Beth Torah in New Jersey had Shabbat. They gathered for the Jewish worship service using the video technology of Zoom. Shabbat is the day of rest in the Jewish religion. It starts on Friday at sunset. It continues until the following evening.

Steven Stern is involved with the synagogue. He said people are trying to get used to the technology. He is also planning group meetings on Zoom to discuss religion.

Stern said he wants to create opportunities for people to engage with their religion, while also seeing each other, hearing each other, connecting and feeling part of the community.

The coronavirus has brought questions about religion and the community into regular conversation. Reverend Paul Brandeis Raushenbush has been a Baptist minister for nearly 25 years. He's been involved with online church communities in the past.

"The truth is, we are in touch with one another much more because of technology than we were before, not less," he says. "My Facebook page feels like a prayer circle."

Raushenbush says on Facebook, he sees that people are reaching out to one another in new ways that are allowing "for a deep sense of community."

On This Virtual Rock

On March 22, Raushenbush helped lead a virtual church gathering online. He and the participants used avatars, or characters for people. He led a meditation on it. Then Raushenbush asked the avatars to gather with him on a large rock in the field in the online world.

The participants shared how they were feeling. They used "emoticons." Some released hearts that bubbled above their heads to relate to what others were saying.

"We can actually say things to one another and show up for one another in ways that can be deeply loving," says Raushenbush. He added that online, people sometimes show their feelings even more than in person.

Quiz

1 Read the section "Shabbat Via Zoom."

Select the sentence from the section that shows how church members are responding to technology.

- (A) On March 20, the Jewish synagogue Temple Beth O'r Beth Torah in New Jersey had Shabbat.
- (B) They gathered for the Jewish worship service using the video technology of Zoom.
- (C) The coronavirus has brought questions about religion and the community into regular conversation.
- (D) Raushenbush says on Facebook, he sees that people are reaching out to one another in new ways that are allowing "for a deep sense of community."

2 Read the article's introduction [paragraphs 1-10].

Which sentence from the section supports the conclusion that worshiping online falls short as a substitute for in-person gatherings?

- (A) It had already offered social media options for people who could not come in person.
- (B) Bassett-Tirrell says these technologies cannot replace some essential traditions of Catholic worship.
- (C) The vast majority of worship communities have turned to technology.
- (D) For many, the lack of community and physical traditions has brought up important questions about religion and spirituality.

3 Read the paragraph from the section "Shabbat Via Zoom."

Stern said he wants to create opportunities for people to engage with their religion, while also seeing each other, hearing each other, connecting and feeling part of the community.

How does this paragraph support the MAIN idea of the article?

- (A) by describing the features of virtual meeting tools
- (B) by comparing virtual meetings with physical gatherings
- (C) by explaining how people like to be with one another in person
- (D) by emphasizing the goal of using technology for faith communities

4 Read the summary of the MAIN ideas of the article.

Because of social distancing, many church communities are looking to technology to keep people connected. They livestream worship services and offer virtual meetings so that members can continue to gather and support one another. Many faiths have certain obligations for members, so the lack of traditional worship has led to questions about religion and spirituality.

Which answer choice would complete the summary?

- (A) People are practicing social distancing because of the spread of the coronavirus.
- (B) Facebook and Zoom are being used by church communities to keep members connected.
- (C) Church leaders say that saving lives should take priority over all other religious duties.
- (D) Technology has made it possible for people to attend Mass, Shabbat or Jumu'ah services.