

The Value of Online Ministry

By PAUL J. SCHARF

Media ministries have played a large role in my own growth and development as a Christian—since the days of cassette tapes, setting the VCR and having to plan my schedule around live radio. It should come as no surprise, then, that I was already a cheerleader for online ministry before the current crisis began.

And what an opportunity for online ministry this calamity provides us! While it has limited almost all of us to ministering strictly online, the net result is that never before in the history of the world have the gospel of Christ and Biblical truth been more widely proclaimed or more readily accessible than they are right now.

I am truly inspired by the aggressive and intentional efforts that some are making to reach far more people—in fact, multiples of the number of their regular congregants—through online ministry during these desperate and despairing days.

On the other end of the spectrum, sadly, are those ministries that are simply unlikely to survive this time.

The current crisis has exposed all of us with regard to the nature and effectiveness of our online ministries, and I think we are at a point within this process where it would be well for us to step back and evaluate our status and our progress. There is now a body of work to evaluate, and there is still time to make course corrections. By all appearances, as well as many educated predictions, the current environment could go on for a long, long time. Even after government mandates to stay home expire, many people—out of either habit or fear—may continue to choose to limit their exposure to the outside world. In short, the need for online ministry is not going away anytime soon.

And that part is very exciting to me. Think about it! In the last two decades, it has become possible for a small church to have a worldwide outreach with minimal equipment or expense, through online ministry. The only hurdle to exerting wider influence is the exigency of providing compelling content.

As it relates to the current crisis, I think we see several categories of preparedness for online ministry.

First, there were some churches that were already providing online streaming of their services—or, at least, of their sermons—and changed little, if anything, to adjust to the present situation. I know of at least one case where the pastor has not had to interrupt his series or change the format at all. Churches in this category have certainly had the least amount of stress during this time, and have likely been poised to make the greatest impact in reaching an online audience.

The next category of online ministry involves those who did not previously offer services online—or, at least, did not do it very well—but who have embraced this time as a

challenge and opportunity to begin something new. Furthermore, they see their work as an investment in an endeavor that will last beyond the shutdown.

I would place my own ministry with The Friends of Israel in this category. I did not anticipate something like this crisis happening, would not have chosen it and, frankly, was not prepared for it. I have attempted, however, to embrace it as a gift from God in one particular sense. It has created the necessity, but also given me the opportunity, to do a number of things—especially in the realm of online ministry—that I have needed and intended to do all along, but had not yet implemented. I have no intention of ending these new means of communication once the shutdown is over. My plan is, rather, to intensify my efforts and improve the quality of the content and format, as the Lord allows.

I realize that these categories may be simplistic, and it has also not been my purpose here to attempt to catalog or evaluate the various approaches to online church that we have seen during this crisis. That would also be an interesting study for the future.

But let me finish by giving a gentle nudge to those in a third category, who have taken up online ministry only now during this crisis, and have done so with a view toward ending it when life returns to normal. I would like to challenge you to rethink that process in light of both world events and spiritual opportunities.

Perhaps you will need to take a step back and reevaluate the process. Maybe you will ultimately find that live streaming is not your strong suit. But please reconsider the value of online ministry. I believe that it will only become more vital as we move forward. If you are attempting to provide fascinating content—which you should be—then please allow the Lord to multiply its effectiveness online.

Don't measure your efforts against a bigger church with expensive equipment and a large staff (2 Cor. 10:12). Do your best work, seek to keep improving, and let God use His Word in the hearts of people (Isa. 55:11; Heb. 4:12-13).

One final note: Several pastors, from churches large and small, have come forward during this time with their best attempts at addressing aspects of the current crisis from a Biblical basis. Many of these presentations have been truly profound, and have served to encourage and edify me. May God bless them for it!

“The Lord gave the word;
Great was the company of those who proclaimed it” (Ps. 68:11).

Paul J. Scharf (M.A., M.Div., Faith Baptist Theological Seminary) is a church ministries representative for The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, based in Columbus, WI, and serving in the Midwest. For more information on his ministry, visit sermonaudio.com/pscharf or foi.org/scharf, or email pscharf@foi.org.

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