

A MOMENT LIKE THIS

PLANNING YOUR EASTER SERVICES
DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS

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NEW CHALLENGE.

NEW FORMAT.

SAME EMPTY TOMB.

INTRODUCTION

The Neighborhood Church of SmallTown averages 300-400 people every weekend. The church's lead pastor - Pastor Sam - is equal parts leader, manager, and visionary. He keeps people's attention when he speaks, and guides them towards grace and truth with every sermon.

Back in March - which now seems like a distant time - the shelter at home directives began to take effect. Pastor Sam decided that his new leadership role must help his people see the unique opportunity before them, and then to respond accordingly. To some extent, that had always been his leadership role, but that role seems more important, and even sacred to Pastor Sam, now more than ever. Rather than trying to do the same ministry in the same way using the same methods, he's decided that he must be willing to put every method and strategy on the table for discussion. For Pastor Sam, this became a season in his leadership life that had no room for sacred cows.

Did he have all the answers? Of course not. No one could possibly have all the answers. But for Pastor Sam, his goal wasn't to act successful or all-knowing. His goal was to be faithful - to his God, and to his people.

HOW CAN WE INVITE UNBELIEVERS TO OUR ONLINE EASTER SERVICES?

The first strategy his leadership team would engage around became their church's Easter invitation strategy. How would the church attenders invite their friends into their online Easter service?

Like every other church, the Coronavirus caught them by surprise. They didn't hide that, nor did they try to fake their way through it. Instead Pastor Sam and his leaders began praying hard to see the opportunities here. It's that spirit, that attitude, and that hope that led them to rethink their Easter invitational strategy.

Whatever the strategy looked like, they decided it would need to follow these important guidelines:

- Their invitational strategy should have the same heart underneath it all. For them, it was all about creating a loving invitation for outsiders to experience Neighborhood Church. Outsiders are not a notch in Neighborhood's evangelism belt; they're people who need to know how much God loves them.
- Their invitational strategy should be simple and easy for people to follow.
- Their invitational strategy should be easy to implement from a leader and volunteer perspective.

And with those three guiding values in mind, the church developed the following plan:

First, as the leaders called into a Zoom meeting, Pastor Sam wrote the following question on his home office whiteboard...

What will an Easter invitation look like for 2020?

It didn't take them long to decide that the invitation would come from their own regular attenders, not from any pastoral platform or paid marketing campaign. One of their evangelistic core values is that the best people to invite outsiders into the church are **ALREADY** in their circle of relationships. So they didn't need to change or pivot. This value was already in their spiritual DNA.

But the framework of the invitation would shift. This year, the invitations would happen almost exclusively online. The invitation would simply involve asking everyone in their church to post an invitation on all their social channels. They would need to wordsmith it, but it would be something like: "To all my friends on Facebook (or Twitter, or Instagram, etc.) - I love my church, and I'd love for you to watch our online Easter service with me this weekend." After those words, each person would simply fill in the time and live streaming information. They knew that clickable links would work best.

But that wasn't the only online invitation they'd ask their attenders to use. The church leaders recognized that they should record the live stream, and create a secondary invitation for that recorded service. This recording would be uploaded to the church's YouTube channel, and a secondary invitation would be posted on every attenders' social platform, by the attender. They would use similar words from the first post, but with a little tweak: "If you weren't able to join me at church earlier today, I hope you'll check out what happened - (YouTube URL) - It was so good!"

As they were having this discussion, one of the creative content writers on the team volunteered to write what she called "Social Post Suggestions". She and the other leaders realized that it would be a helpful thing to email all of their

regular attenders, and “suggest” two or three samples of invitations, written by someone who was gifted at getting the information correct, in a compelling way.

With their invitational strategy nailed, Pastor Sam began asking some hard questions about what the actual Easter service should look like this year.

SERVICE ELEMENTS TO RECONSIDER IN AN ONLINE FORMAT

Pastor Sam knew he had to have an honest conversation with his service planning team. He scheduled another Zoom meeting with his worship leader, his Worship Director, and Mike - the recently appointed “Media Director” volunteer who had no idea what he was getting himself into. He led the team through a frank assessment of what might work, and more importantly, what might NOT work for an online service. He reminded his team that they’re not under any rule that requires the exact service elements they use when the church is gathered in their normal physical location.

For Pastor Sam, recreating live music became a sticking point. The church has a good band and vocalists - that wasn’t the problem. The problem was the actual recording of this full band. Did they have enough time and expertise to create something that was good enough? Maybe so. But maybe not. They were on the fence.

Pastor Sam spoke a hard truth when he expressed concern over their inability to record a full band doing a full worship set, and producing a quality recording on the other side. He felt strongly that this might actually cause a

non-believer to click away - not due to the skill of the musicians and vocalists, but because of the church's internal ability to execute on a quality recording.

The team decided to do the hard things, but also the best things. They pivoted away from their normal music in two ways:

First, they decided to record a stripped down acoustic version of three songs, not five. Normally, they'd sing five songs, but not for this online service.

Second, they chose songs everyone knew by heart (or almost by heart), and agreed that they would sing no new or barely-new songs. In this way, the songs would become one area that might help viewers feel normal - something vital during this season that isn't normal at all. If a majority of the church couldn't at least hum their way through the songs, they didn't sing them on this Easter.

Then, in the middle of the week, one of the team members used a 4k phone camera to record two musicians - a husband and wife - singing and leading from their living room. They purchased a condenser microphone earlier that day - one that plugged directly into their iPhone. They knew this wasn't a necessity, but these artists wanted to deliver the best art they could, even when resources were at a minimum.

They recorded the music ahead of time, but as a test. They sent the rough test to Pastor Sam, and asked for his feedback. Pastor Sam and the worship leader had a good working relationship, but one that had also experienced misunderstandings in the past. Pastor Sam was like many organizational leaders who need to see the product before they understand the concept. So this test was just a way of honoring Pastor Sam's leadership, but also to gain important feedback into creating the final videos.

Incorporating Pastor Sam's thoughts, they created two final recorded assets. One video would be their service Opener Song, and the other video would include two full-length worship songs, seamed together with a Scripture

reading in the middle. One of the musicians prayed at the end of the two-song set, inviting people to bow their heads in their living rooms together with him, and to pray as he prayed. They added a fade up and fade out at the end of each video, so the transition would be easy on the eyes of viewers, and wouldn't cause people to become distracted by a technical glitch that was entirely avoidable with some minimal short-term planning.

Pastor Sam realized that the more people he could get onto the "main stage" of the live stream service, the better. In the same spirit of singing songs that everyone knew already, he chose beloved people who everyone knew to be a part of this live stream. "Keep it as normal as possible", he kept telling himself. He asked the Children's Pastor to do a recorded Welcome, and a key volunteer to read a recorded portion of Scripture. In this way, most of the service was already recorded on video, and Pastor Sam would simply need to preach live.

Pastor Sam also asked the Media Team leader to find an online service Countdown video - the kind that's available for instant download. He also spotted a great sermon introduction video that introduced the topic of Easter. He decided to preach immediately after that video played. He also decided not to try and create sermon notes or any Powerpoint presentation. He would say, "write this down" during his sermon instead. He knew the addition of these videos would raise the overall production quality of the service.

And somehow, in some way, in the middle of leading his staff and volunteers through these strategic changes, Pastor Sam set aside a few hours every day (and night) to prepare a sermon - a special message for Neighborhood's online Easter service.

HOW TO PREPARE FOR A SERMON TO BE DELIVERED ONLINE

Pastor Sam wasn't great at being self-aware in all areas of his life. But he was acutely self-aware when it came to his public speaking abilities. He knew what he was good at, and he knew what he struggled with. Sam was a good public speaker, but he wasn't a great one. And if he was asking the rest of his team to shift their strategy for the other online worship elements, then he'd need to be willing to shift his preaching strategy too.

He decided that speaking his normal 35-minute sermon would be a mistake because in their new online environment, people would literally just change channels if they became too distracted. He chose, instead, to deliver a 20-25 minute sermon. He remembered something a seminary professor had told him years earlier: "If you can't say it in 25 minutes, you can't say it at all!" He didn't always agree with that statement, but when speaking into a camera with no live congregation in the room, he knew his seminary professor was right.

On Tuesday morning, he turned his iPhone off, muted his email notifications, opened Luke's resurrection narrative, and decided that whatever he discovered there would become the skeleton for his message. He grabbed a few of his favorite commentaries, and started digging in.

As soon as he created a rough outline for his sermon, he did something intriguing. He printed out the Facebook profile pictures of four people in his community. Three of the people attended his church, and the other was a friend who didn't attend any church. These were two women and two men who were socially and racially representative of his community. He looped a piece of scotch tape, and attached their pictures to the wall of his home study. As he formed the words and stories for his Easter message, he prepared that message as if he was speaking directly to those four people.

As he continued to create his sermon, he asked a few important questions:

- When will they know that they are seen and understood by me?
- When will they recalibrate their lives with the promises of God?
- When will they be connected to the hope of the resurrection?
- When will they be invited into courage?
- When will they smile?

He pushed his sermon to 90% completion by Saturday night. He tried to go to sleep early, but tossed and turned with a mixture of fear, faith, and hope. This was all new to him, and he felt it with added weight all night long.

HOW TO PREACH INTO A CAMERA AND KEEP IT INSPIRING

He awoke on Easter Sunday morning at 5:00am, and put the last pieces of his sermon together. He remained uncomfortable with the new live streaming format of Neighborhood's services. He was self-conscious about preaching into a camera, and was fearful that he'd be boring.

As he was driving to his empty church building that morning, he received a text from his dad. Patrick was a retired pastor, and his son Sam had followed in the ministry footsteps of his father. Patrick wasn't one to mince words, so when Sam called him back, he knew he was about to receive a healthy dose of

honesty. In the past, he might ignore the text, but on that morning, he knew he needed to hear from his father.

After exchanging pleasantries and checking in on his dad's health, Sam told his father about his feelings of insecurity and anxiety. He shared his concerns about the financial future of the church. And it was no surprise for Sam to hear Patrick say these words to him in response...

"Son. I know this feels weird. I know this feels unnatural. I know it even might feel inauthentic. But for God's sake - literally, for God's sake - You gotta get over yourself!"

He had Sam's attention.

"You've been called to lead, son. Leaders, by definition, lead people somewhere they may or may not want to go. When you do that, it's uncomfortable, plain and simple. But do you realize that your people really WANT to hear from you? No matter how uncomfortable you feel, you've built into their lives for this moment."

Sam felt himself hearing every word his father was sharing. While his visceral reaction was to fight back and prove his dad wrong, the Holy Spirit in Sam told him to lean in and just listen.

"Everyone is insecure, son. I'm secure. So are you. We wonder if we're prepared enough, or good enough, or liked enough? We wonder if the people will even watch us at all, or just turn on Netpixel instead."

Sam asked, "Netflix dad?"

Patrick responded, "I don't know what your mother watches, Sam, but that's not the point!"

Same could hear his father getting worked up on the other end of the phone.

“At the end of the day son, we need to realize that it’s never ALL ON US to make any of that stuff happen.”

After a three-second pause that felt longer, Patrick voiced the question underneath all other questions.

“Are you really relying on the power of the Holy Spirit, or are you just claiming that reliance because it sounds Christian?”

Sam didn’t respond directly. Instead, as he pulled into the parking lot of the church. He said, “Dad. Thank you. You have a very direct way of speaking, but your voice was the voice I needed this morning.”

Pastor Sam opened the door to his office, and prayed. First, he prayed for himself. Next, he prayed for all of the people who would be listening. He invited God to speak through him, but also for God to overwhelm his entire church with the outcomes that only God can create. Sam said out loud, “God. I give you my expectations, and ask you to replace them with Yours.”

He walked into the main auditorium where a single camera was sitting on an inexpensive tripod. Sam’s media director would arrive in a few minutes, but this next short moment in the empty auditorium became sacred to Sam.

He engaged in the necessary self-talk that realigned Sam with the reality of the situation, and the reality of the empty tomb.

He re-read an email that another pastor sent him during the week, reminding him that he didn’t need to put together a full production, with all the bells and whistles.

There was the knowledge that everyone who would join the church online that morning would be there by Divine appointment.

He reminded himself that he couldn't be the one-on-one version of Sam at the coffee shop meeting, and that he needed to channel the version of Sam on the platform, proclaiming that the Son of God didn't stay dead!

He gave control to the Holy Spirit.

Mike, his volunteer media director walked in, turned on the camera lights, tested Sam's microphone, and gave Sam the thumbs up. The two prayed together, and Mike ended the prayer with an encouraging word about Pastor Sam being called to this moment, this time, and this exact minute. Mike called Paul by the wrong name, but Sam knew his heart.

And as Mike declared "...and we're live in 5, 4, 3...", Pastor Sam took his last deep breath, settled in, put a big smile on his face, looked directly into the camera, and launched into Neighborhood's online Easter service.

And what happened during the next 45 minutes wasn't perfect.

But it was...

Beautiful.