

Virtual Church, Virtual Connection

When the COVID-19 mania spiraled into lockdowns, many of us turned to virtual substitutes for key parts of our lives—work, school, socializing, and even religion. In many cases, we've returned to the real world, or we at least are no longer mandated to use the virtual option. But when it comes to choosing whether to attend church in person or online, a [recent Pew Research Center report](#) shows that many people are still opting for the virtual.

According to this report (based on a study done in November 2022), "About a quarter of U.S. adults regularly watch religious services online or on TV." The reasons for why people chose virtual varied, but the most-cited explanation was convenience (74 percent), followed by the service being too far from the individual's home (60 percent).

Of the people who watch services virtually, just over two-thirds are satisfied with those services, with 68 percent saying they are satisfied with the sermons and 54 percent saying they are satisfied with the music.

With so many people generally happy with virtual service, we might wonder if there is anything wrong with attending church virtually. Certainly, many of us dreaded the forced virtualization of COVID, but nowadays, people are making a choice.

However, perhaps the most important part of the report discusses the actual experience of attending virtually rather than in person:

Virtual viewers are much less likely to report feeling connected to other worshippers. Roughly two-thirds (65%) of regular in-person attenders say they feel 'a great deal' or

'quite a bit' of connection with their fellow attenders, the two highest options on a five-point scale.

By comparison, far fewer regular viewers – 28% – say they feel a strong connection with people who are attending a service in person while they, themselves, are watching on a screen. And 22% of virtual viewers say they feel strongly connected to the other people watching online or on TV. (Emphasis removed.)

In other words, people attending online aren't experiencing the same level of connection as those attending in person. And no matter how we try to combine statistics here, there's still a double-digit percentile deficit for those attending online.

Additionally, the study explains that only a quarter of people who virtually attend services feel like they are active participants.

Indeed, when we compare the satisfaction of virtual versus in-person attendees, we see this discrepancy continue to play out: "While majorities express satisfaction with virtual services, even bigger shares of physical attenders say they feel extremely or very satisfied with the sermons (74%) and music (69%) at the services they attend in person" (emphasis removed).

Clearly, attending virtually isn't as good as attending in person. It's also clear that virtual services aren't a substitute for the connection and community of in-person services, and with how few people feel fully connected in virtual services, it's interesting that the most-cited reason for attending service virtually is convenience. For people who don't have a church in their denomination near them or for people who are homebound, virtual services are certainly a helpful option. However, when convenience is the top reason given, I can't help but think that more people could be turning off the TV and attending in person.

In a culture where so many people—particularly young people—feel isolated and [lonely](#), retreating to the virtual only exasperates the [loneliness epidemic](#).

Loneliness is such a problem in American society that even the U.S. surgeon general has [warned](#) about the impacts of an increasingly lonely society, and he points out that loneliness has both psychological and physiological impacts, including increased risks of dementia (50 percent), stroke (32 percent), and heart disease (29 percent). Not to mention how loneliness may be further contributing to the deterioration of our culture.

Interestingly, the surgeon general proposes several solutions to reverse the loneliness epidemic, many of which rely on government intervention, action, and regulation, but none of which mention the importance of religious community in people's lives. Yet, being part of a [religious community](#) prevents loneliness. And it wasn't that long ago that churches were a central hub for people to connect with others who shared their values. Churches were integral to the social fabric of communities.

Even though it's more convenient to attend a service virtually from the comfort of a couch, it's immensely more valuable to get dressed, hop in the car, and surround ourselves with meaningful connection. And for those who already opt for the in-person service, there's probably someone—whether an in-person or virtual connection—who could use some real-life fellowship.

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