

Guidance re. Privacy Issues and “Hybrid” Worship

The hybridized format of in-person and online worship brings many opportunities for us to connect and gather, while still including those who are not able to join in person. However, broadcasting services online which also feature in-person attendees may raise a number of privacy issues which should be considered by those responsible for planning such services. The following can be considered “best practices” which you may wish to adopt or adapt in the particular context of your parish:

Raise awareness: While there is generally no reasonable expectation of privacy in a worship service that is open to the public, it is good practice to let attendees know that services will be broadcast via a livestream— this way, they can determine the amount of information they’re comfortable providing if, for example, they want to make a prayer request or share a health update regarding a fellow member of the congregation. **One approach is to place signs in the narthex/entrance vestibules of the church and/or notices in the church bulletin or newsletter reminding congregants that the service will be livestreamed.**

Create “no video” zones. To the extent possible in your parish’s set-up, designate specific places or areas within the church where video does not reach so members who don’t want to appear on video can comfortably gather there.

Get permission. If you know in advance that individuals will be participating in the service (for example they are a lector, intercessor, or altar server), confirm with them that they know they will appear on the broadcast. Determine the amount of personal information that they feel comfortable being shared online. For example, discuss whether you will be sharing just their image or including their name in the broadcast. Also be mindful about personal prayer requests and health updates – these should only be streamed with the consent of the individual in question.

Exercise particular care with minors. Avoid putting their names and images on the live stream, or, at the very minimum, proceed only with authorization from their parents, guardians, or (if they are of an appropriate age), the individuals themselves.

Have a Retention Policy: Give consideration to how long the livestream broadcast will be available online and on what forums (for example, will it only be distributed via a link on the church’s website, or shared through social media platforms as well? Is it archived “forever”, or only available through a link for a fixed period?). Convey this information to attendees so they can make an informed decision on whether they are comfortable with their image or other personal information (name, health concerns or other prayer requests) being available to individuals online for that length of time and on those platforms. If your practice is to keep an archive of livestreamed services, consider whether the entire service or (for example) only the sermon ought to be available online. If you plan to edit worship services into clips to be curated and available through social media, make sure that the community is aware of this may occur.

Please refer to previous correspondence and future updates from Bishop John Stephens for details about permissible in-person worship activities.