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# Shaping Worship During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Sparking New Connections at New Mount Zion Baptist Church, Roxboro, North Carolina

Like many congregations, New Mount Zion Baptist Church has people with varying abilities, incomes, and technology access. In this edited conversation, LaTonya McIver Penny shares how to use a mix of digital and old-fashioned ways to help worshipers and community members stay connected.

**By:** [LaTonya McIver Penny](#), [Joan Huyser-Honig](#)

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**Conversation** posted on April 14, 2020



shaping worship during  
COVID-19 PANDEMIC

**LaTonya McIver Penny:** New Mount Zion Baptist Church pastor; Family Abuse Services of Alamance County executive director; [Mary's Grace](#) founder and director

**Current city:** Roxboro, North Carolina

**Denominational context:** Baptist

**Worship roles:** LaTonya McIver Penny plans and leads worship with her husband, the pastor Charles Penny II, and minister of music Cynthia Dixon.

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**COVID-19 situation:** Running a church and a domestic violence agency during a pandemic is trying and tiring. We canceled in-person worship on Sunday, March 15, well before the North Carolina governor's stay-at-home order went into effect on March 30. The order states that gatherings may not have more than ten people and that participants should practice social [physical] distancing. We normally see between 100 and 150 at church each Sunday. I am the only full-time paid staff, but I have three associate ministers and a part-time church secretary.

Before COVID-19, we relied only on in-person worship services and Bible studies. If I was out of town, I'd Skype into the Bible study. I would be on a screen while others were interacting in the sanctuary. Most of our congregation members have access to technology. Currently we are not having service face-to-face. Instead we use a conference call line simultaneously with a private Facebook group for live worship.

At first, those connected to a family member with technology could visit them to go online. Now the governor suggests visiting only those whom you are taking care of. But people who can't go online can dial into our conference call line even from a landline.

Even though we now go live from our home, we try to keep as many service elements as possible without putting anyone in danger or requiring anyone from church to assist. My husband does a call to worship and invocation. I lead us through what we call pastor's briefs, which includes news, announcements, or community updates. Next, one of us will suggest offering via the [Givelify](#) app or by writing and mailing a check. Then I do the sermon, followed by a call to salvation. I connect with our minister of music for suggestions on incorporating music. Right now we use music from online sources at the beginning of the service, while people are logging in.

**What's working well—or not:** The Facebook private group, conference call line, and online giving are all working well. I typically dial in to our conference call line and immediately mute all callers so their conversations will not be a distraction. On every call, whether at work or at home, there seems to be that one person who just can't mute themselves, so we do that for them. We are using [Free Conference Call](#) because it is free and simple to use. Our Facebook group was originally only for church members, but that group has quickly grown to include nonmembers who want a personal connection instead of a mass streamed service.

I am making Facetime calls to see members' beautiful faces as well as old-fashioned phone calls just to hear voices. I have started sending handwritten personal notes to keep people encouraged. I think we have forgotten the joy of getting a handwritten note in the mail. We are about to launch a small-group book study via Zoom so we can see and hear one another while sharing times of devotion and centering. We stay connected with Tuesday and Thursday prayer meetings via the Facebook group and conference call.

It seems as though we are more connected now with a larger attendance at Facebook Bible study than face-to-face Bible study. This shows me the need to think outside of the box for Bible study when we return to the sanctuary.

**Most helpful worship resources:** I am leaning heavily on COVID-19 online worship resources from the [Calvin Institute of Christian Worship](#) and the newly launched [All Belong](#) COVID-19 worship responses for those who are differently abled. This is a time to think outside of our normal ways of teaching and preaching and to meet

the community, the real church, right where they are. Yet we must not forget to offer a variety of ways to teach and preach so that we are reaching all abilities. I am trying to be inclusive in my language and in how I handle biblical texts. I try to use visual aids while I preach, and All Belong gives good ideas for helping visual learners. Our twins are staying connected, often by sitting and watching me preach, helping me set up equipment, and preparing for lessons. They received communion while we had a virtual communion service to share with others.

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***“I wrestle with the question of what ‘church’ will look and feel like after all of this. Will we ever be the same, or was this just what the church needed to spark a new fire and new life into traditional church?”***

**—LaTonya McIver Penny**

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**Needs, questions, or insights to share:** Our biggest need is getting technology to families who do not have the financial resources, whose children have always depended on using computers at the local library. Thankfully, 90 percent of our church can connect, because we offer two ways to join us, either through a social media platform or by calling in. If people don’t have cell phones, they typically still have a landline, so it is critical for me to always offer both options so we don’t exclude anyone. Still, some of our people are isolated. I wrestle with the question of what “church” will look and feel like after all of this. Will we ever be the same, or was this just what the church needed to spark a new fire and new life into traditional church?

I challenge other worship leaders to make sure they are trying to reach all abilities in their planning. I am very impressed with churches who are able to have interpreters present during their services or on the screen for multiple ways of communicating. I am curious if anyone is using closed caption options, and if that is available for online platforms. I encourage leaders to think about ways other than just computers to reach people, such as by mail or old-school newsletters.

## LEARN MORE

Besides Facebook, New Mount Zion Baptist Church provides regular updates on the [Local Prayers website](#). Church Juice suggests using teams to [make phone calls and send cards](#) to people with special needs. All Belong offers dozens of ideas to [stay connected with people of varying abilities](#).

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LaTonya McIver Penny

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1855 Knollcrest Circle SE Grand Rapids, MI 49546-4402 USA

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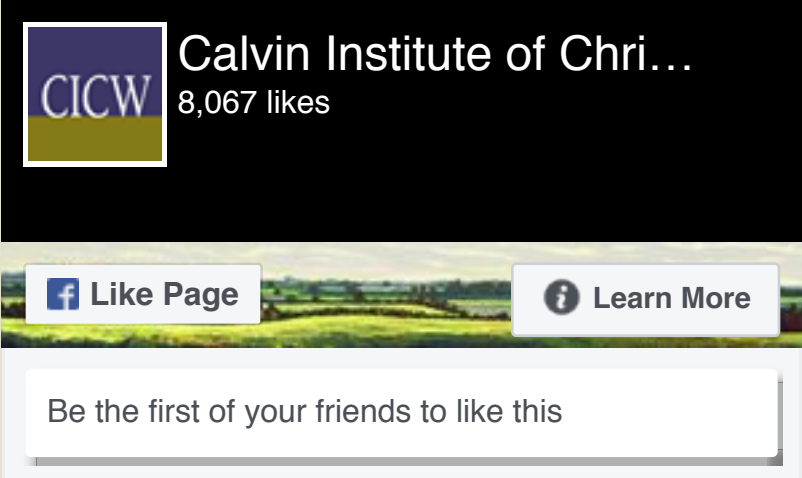
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