



7 Ways to Connect with Your Community with Low – or No – Broadband Access

Have you found yourself facing the challenge of connecting with some in your congregation who cannot connect online for various reasons? Are you finding it a challenge to connect with your congregation or parts of it? Many local churches and leaders are experiencing similar challenges. This may be due to late adapters or non-adapters to technology, or it might be due to the geographical challenge of access to internet and cellular technology, or some other reason. There are those within the church who desire a worship experience, who seek connection through Bible studies or prayer groups, and who long to feel connected but lack the access to the tools of technology that are needed to maintain community during a time of physical distancing. Making connections will not only help create the feeling of community and offer opportunities to grow in discipleship now, but can also be a bridge toward deeper discipleship and faithful presence through maintaining and fostering relationships until we can all gather safely again. There are ways to maintain community and grow in our discipleship, as we experience worship, study, prayer, and fellowship together in ways that use limited technology. It may seem challenging, especially with limited technology, but it's worth it, if it means that those within our congregation and community who are isolated physically, emotionally, spiritually, and technologically, experience the good news of Jesus Christ through human community.

We've compiled some ideas and resources for you to try as you face the opportunity to connect creatively in this season.

Low-Tech Options for Churches to Maintain Community in Times of Physical Distancing

1. Use Analog Methods

No rule says we must use digital and online technologies to engage our members. Think about using old-school ways to encourage participation. Record the sermon and worship service; then find the medium that best suits your audience. That might mean you can email a digital file or even burn the file to a DVD. You can mail or deliver DVDs to people's houses.

2. Use Phone-to-Phone Sharing

The phones we carry are amazing tools. They can be used in a variety of ways to help connect those who cannot attend worship (when that can happen again) or even those who do not have internet access. Modern cell phones allow us to record audio files. It is possible for a person watching the worship service (live or recorded) to call parishioners who do not have internet service, so they can listen through their phones (cellphones or landline phones).

3. Connect to Those with Low Bandwidth Internet Service

For those with low bandwidth, use email to send hyperlinks to private YouTube channels or Dropbox links. These services allow those with low bandwidth internet service to view previously recorded worship services and messages when live-streaming may not be an option.

4. Offer Drive-in Worship

Envision a drive-in movie theater, yet in a parking lot and for worship. Invite participants to remain in their cars and listen on a specific FM radio station. Use an FM transmitter to broadcast the preacher and other worship leaders. A helpful mantra for the invitation is, “Come as you are; stay in your car.” As with any local gathering, follow local guidelines and—if necessary—inform local authorities. An FM transmitter typically costs around \$140. For more information on options using an FM transmitter, see the article for churches on AudioFetch, <https://www.audiofetch.com/church-parking-lot-services>.

Read the following testimonial from a church in North Georgia that held “Drive-in Worship,” <https://www.ngumc.org/newsdetail/church-holds-drive-in-worship-in-response-to-covid-19-13535337>.

5. Make the Church a Wi-Fi Hotspot for the Community

For those in remote locations where internet access is limited, the church could make its Wi-Fi connection available for guests. This could be particularly aimed at those who need occasional internet access for work or school. From the safety of their cars, community guests could access the internet from the church parking lot. For safety purposes, the church could make a password available for guests and/or operate the Wi-Fi connection during certain parts of the day. If access is an issue for your entire area, consider reaching out to the ITRDC (Information Technology Resource Disaster Center), <https://www.itdrc.org>, for help. For an example, see “In Rural Oklahoma, a Wi-Fi Hotspot Brings a Dash of Hope and Excitement.”

6. Connect Through Landlines

When it comes to engaging people in our communities who do not have internet access, there are still some affordable options. Though video conference services do not offer a wide range of local area code numbers, there are a few possibilities related to affordable landline conference call options.

Free Conference Call (<https://www.freeconferencecall.com/participant-instructions>)

- This is a free service.
- It does have some video conference integration.
- People can break into sub-groups.
- The toll-free number is an upgraded service (\$0.02/minute).

Grasshopper.com (<https://grasshopper.com/numbers/toll-free-numbers>)

- Offers cheap 1.800 numbers.
- Comes with a free seven-day trial.
- Obviously, free for those who would call in.
- Uses (833) as the area code.
- For cellphone users, it is free to call in if they are on an unlimited plan.
- Pricing appears to be about \$250 per year with discount. It can be billed monthly.
- Offers integration to Join.me.

Join.me (<https://www.join.me/toll-free>)

- The organization/person with the Join.Me account picks up the tab for those calling toll free.
- Has non-profit pricing—about \$160 a year.
- There is a per minute pricing for those calling in toll-free (\$0.08/minute) that works out to just less than \$5 per person calling in for 60 minutes.

Branded Bridge Line (<https://brandedbridgeline.com>)

- Most expensive of the options.
- \$216 a year for the cheapest unlimited callers plan.
- Does have a free two-week trial.
- Additional costs to add a toll-free number.
- Cheapest month-to-month plans (no annual contract) are \$20 and \$25 dollars (\$20 plan allows only 15 callers).
- There is a ten percent discount for non-profits.



7. Add a Toll-Free Phone Number to Facebook Live Stream

This idea comes courtesy of Brad Bennett of Central United Methodist Church in Fairmont, West Virginia.

To obtain a toll-free number and access code for your Facebook live stream, navigate to your church Facebook page from which you will Go Live (for Brad this is Central's page facebook.com/CUMCFairmont)

Facebook has launched a new Live Producer that can be accessed from any entry point to Live from a page and at facebook.com/live/producer.

On the left-hand side, you can **Go Live Now** or **Schedule a Live Video**—you can generate a phone number for either option. (Brad chose Schedule a Live Video)

Navigate to Settings (click the V beside Streaming)

1. Click *Show Dial-in Number*. You may be prompted to select a country for which you need the telephone number.
2. Copy and share the *phone number* and *access code* with your community so those who do not have web or mobile data access can listen to your livestream.

You can click the copy button beside the phone number and access code and then paste as text where needed. (Brad shares the number through email, phone tree, and pins it as a comment to the livestream.)

Next, click the V beside viewers. Make sure autogenerated captions is selected (a new and convenient feature).

After that, enter the information for your livestream, upload a picture, and add an engaging comment, “We welcome Sarah Wilmoth today as our guest speaker.”

After pressing “schedule my post,” a post was generated to Brad’s Facebook page announcing the livestream. Brad added the phone number and access code as a comment and encouraged people to share it to their pages.

Things Annual Conference/Districts Can Do

Help local churches defray expenses through grants to purchase equipment and/or on-line services. Equipment might include iPhones, webcams, or audio equipment. Online services could include Dropbox, video conference services, or conference call services.

Things Churches Should Do

- Post links and notes to the church's website or Facebook group so that participants can know where worship services are currently being held—Facebook channel, YouTube, etc. (“Connect with us in worship at...”)
- Aim for engagement more than just participation. Just as our goal is discipleship and not merely attendance, the goal remains the same—discipleship—regardless of the means we use to connect with our communities.



Additional Ideas from ResourceUMC

- **“Using Phones to Worship Remotely”**
<https://www.resourceumc.org/en/content/using-phones-to-worship-remotely>
- **“Local Church Learning Sessions: Technology for Worship, Small Groups, & Giving”**
This webpage contains several links to tutorials for help in using text messaging, dealing with copyright issues, online giving, and livestreaming.
<https://www.resourceumc.org/en/content/local-church-learning-sessions-technology-for-worship-small-groups-and-giving>
- **“Connecting with the Unplugged”**
https://www.resourceumc.org/en/content/connecting-with-the-unplugged?mkt_tok=eyJpIjoiTURKa09EZzJOakUyTWpFeSIsInQiOiI3NHRNSmhobVdDWW-gwbDIOkO1KbEVpWXRxdFVxaDAydXpnTGVNSkRiWFBZXC9RNVVON1BNd-kh0a3JJelpuR0F6U0JIRUtsV3JyMDEUWtjbVRyNTJOdGRzWWJXdIFpWmpXbE-Fyc2tGVkZUTW4xRWVYmloxRVZlUudsYUorZ3lnb0oifQ%3D%3D