

IS DRIVE-IN CHURCH A GOOD IDEA?

In the 2020 season of pandemic restrictions a number of churches found drive-in church to be preferable to the livestream worship option. Should drive-in church have a future beyond the pandemic? What are its benefits? What are its drawbacks? If its use is to be continued or expanded, what considerations must be kept in mind?

It Can Be Isolating

“Drive-In Jesus,” a short documentary about a drive-in church in Daytona Beach, Florida, casts this form of ministry in a harsh, unflattering light. As the film begins, cars arrive in the grassy field in search of a parking place, spacing themselves too far apart for meaningful social interaction.

Drivers tune their car radios to FM 88.5 and silently settle in for worship. No one speaks throughout the entire service except the pastor, the Reverend Robert Kemp-Baird. Dress is casual and the mood is relaxed. In one shot, a woman in an open convertible is checking her mobile phone while a dog in the back seat eyes a nearby truck cab with curiosity, where a man strokes his cat perched comfortably on the ball cap on his head.

It’s Communion Sunday. Worshippers open a miniature communion kit with a cup and a tiny tablet-shaped wafer to self-administer the sacrament. Today’s Scripture lesson is from Psalm 24: “Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts.” The pastor says, “Purity of heart is to will just one thing, to achieve communion, however fleeting it might be, with the divine.” What about communion with others?

It is a picture of isolation. Whatever socializing takes place occurs within individual cars, except for an usher who greets people as he moves from

car to car in his golf cart, receiving the morning’s collection in a long-handled offering bag. After the pastor’s word of benediction, the drivers honk their “amens,” start their cars, and drive away in a long recessional.

At the exit, the man who received the offering waves to drivers at the exit as they pass a sign that reads, “God’s Blessings, Come Again Soon.” The film’s closing credits list “the congregation Daytona Beach Drive-In Christian Church,” but is it a congregation if its members don’t know each other?¹ In the view of this documentary, drive-in church embodies everything that is wrong with our contemporary car-culture. But is it a fair assessment?

It Can Be Creative

In defense of the drive-in worship experience, it should be pointed out that sometimes social distance can be beneficial. During the COVID-19 pandemic,



it proved safer than meeting in a room with others. Immediately after the pandemic forced restrictions on gathering indoors, drive-in worship offered a hybrid alternative: worshipping together and separately at the same time.

This “together-yet-separate” experience explains why drive-in church might continue to be attractive to persons who seek an experience of the gospel but have no desire to replicate the tried-and-true worship experience of the past. These might include:

- Those who have been wounded by a past church experience
- Physically handicapped persons who have difficulty getting to and from the church building from the parking lot
- Cancer patients in chemotherapy
- Persons who experience social anxiety
- Veterans who struggle with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- Those in grief due to recent loss

This list is not comprehensive, but it provides examples of people who seek alternatives to traditional worship venues. Keep on the lookout for persons who might not step foot inside a church building but might be willing to drive up. Traci Parker, pastor of the Woodland Drive-In Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, explains it this way: “We provide community for people who have a hard time accessing it in other ways. A lot of people who come to the drive-in come here because it means they have that option to stay a bit more separate from other people.”²

Drive-in church can be flexible, creative, and focused on people. “Drive-in Jesus” left out the fact that the Daytona Beach church was founded to serve vacationers who came to Florida in their cars, were visiting the beach already dressed in swimsuits, and might want to experience church without the requirement to dress up.³ The film also failed to mention that worshippers who wish to socialize with others are invited to gather after the service for a fellowship time in a church-owned building that had previously served as the drive-in theater’s concession area.

Getting Started

As with designing any worship service, think of the people first, not the logistics.

People

- Target persons in the community who might currently stay away from worship due its setting inside a church building.
- Welcome pet owners. Blessing of the animals, anyone?
- Take advantage of the outdoors. Can children’s activities be planned to take place while the service is going on?
- Plan activities for everyone to take place after the service, such as a picnic. Tailgating parties at sports events are evidence that socializing and cars can be effectively mixed.
- Provide a space indoors or outdoors for drive-in worshippers to socialize after the service.
- Create opportunities for celebrating communion together with others.

Logistics

At a minimum, drive-in worship requires a parking lot or open field, which is a far more likely choice for most churches than utilizing one of a limited and dwindling number of drive-in movie theaters in the United States (321 at last count). Basic equipment includes a low frequency FM transmitter, which due to its limited range (about a half mile) does not require an FCC license. Also needed is an audio sound board or a wireless microphone and receiver. Find an unused radio frequency in your area. One option is the website radio-locator, <https://radio-locator.com/cgi-bin/vacant>. Depending on what’s already on hand, basic equipment could be purchased for as little as \$150.

For Reflection

Drive-in church may be less about the car and more about people and their diverse needs. What needs have been left unmet by worship as it’s currently done? Can you think of persons for whom the drive-in worship experience might provide the safety and privacy they desire?

1. “Drive-In Jesus” by Lauren Defilippo, Aug. 1, 2017. *New York Times* Op-Docs.

2. Daniel Silliman, “Churches Reconsider Drive-In Worship”, *Christianity Today*, March 21, 2020. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/march/drive-in-church-covid19-coronavirus-fm-transmitter-schuller.html>.

3. <https://www.driveinchurch.net>.