SYNOD TECHNOLOGY GRANT UPDATE

We received a Synod Technology Grant totaling $1,000. In addition, Lehigh Presbytery awarded us a $3,000 grant to undertake an install of prosumer level video and streaming equipment. Our congregation then added some funding of our own. At the end of the day, total purchases climbed to the $9,200 mark, not including installation costs pertaining to electrical wiring and cabling. Obviously, without this financial assistance from the Synod and Presbytery, we could not have acquired the quality of software and hardware necessary to have accomplished our vision. So, we are deeply grateful to those who partnered with us.

As the pandemic hit in early 2020, we were completely unprepared to livestream our services. Our thinking about livestreaming relegated the use of that specific technology to the "something that large churches do" category. However, when we couldn't worship in person, we quickly realized that we needed to do something. So, we began with the pastor's cell phone which was used to stream a feed using Facebook Live to our church's Facebook page. Here is a link to one of those early services (note the quality of the video and sound): https://www.facebook.com/400864799942119/videos/2741524199470005

After a couple of weeks, we noticed how many people were "attending" via our livestream. The number was far higher than our typical Sunday morning attendance. And by the time the next service rolled around, we discovered that our service was watched by many more people during the intervening weekdays. We also noticed that friends from other states were watching. In addition, all these people were mailing checks to the church. Our income was greater than was typical!

Several Elders commented on this at our next Session meeting. As a result of that discussion, we realized this technology was the future of the church and we wanted to invest in it. After researching equipment needed and the cost, the Session made the bold decision to invest up to $6000 in acquiring the needed hardware and software. The Synod and Presbytery grants came unexpectedly and at a quite fortuitous time. The Session then decided that the additional funds would be used to take our installation to the next level. So, we added a second camera, a more powerful video capture card and special microphones for the Praise Team. Here is a link to our last in-person worship service (we have since moved back to virtual as there has been a big uptick in Covid): https://www.facebook.com/400864799942119/videos/853026625523438

Even a casual observer couldn't help but notice the vast difference in quality
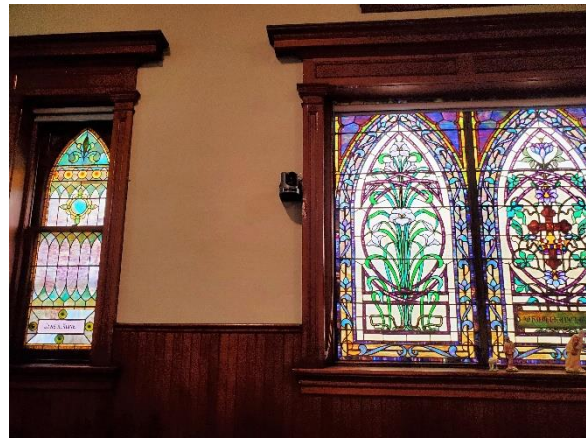
between this video and the earlier one. We are very happy with the results we have achieved so far. The quality of our livestream has improved, and our listening audience has expanded as well. We are beginning to imagine ways to spread the Gospel using this media. Some ideas we are considering are online concerts with our Praise Team and other groups, dramas, worship services on location at a local venue, and so forth. This new technology opens up so many opportunities that we couldn't have imagined before the pandemic.

Below is a picture of the computers we purchased. The one on the left is used for ProPresenter which projects slides onto TV screens in our sanctuary. This software also has the capability of outputting NDI (Network Device Interface) to our network. The computer on the right is then able, through VMix software, to retrieve the NDI output. Ultimately, this arrangement allows a screen on one computer to be shared on another computer. So, instead of a camera being focused on the TV screen in the sanctuary, we can simply retrieve the NDI and broadcast a full frame HD screenshot. It's almost like having a third camera.

The joystick in the image above is used to control two PTZ cameras (see pictures below) that capture images from two distinct vantage points. This has enabled us to broadcast higher quality and more focused video of the pulpit, communion table,

baptismal font, advent wreath, choir loft and the congregation as they pass the peace (when in-person). These cameras should also enable us to more readily use drama, a variety of musical presentations, video clips, and so forth in our worship services. We're only beginning to realize the new and exciting things that are now available to us.

We have spent the better part of the summer and fall on installing equipment, learning software, recruiting and training technicians, and tweaking production settings. So, we don't have much beyond Sunday worship to show for our efforts. Yet, our small church of 125 people has 3 technicians who operate the ProPresenter computer and 5 teams of two people who operate the Vmix computer. And, we've learned a few things we would like to share:

1. Since technology can feel impersonal, we realized people needed to have some sense of connection with us. So, we created a position called, "Digital Deacon." This person's task is to welcome people as they join us online, answer any questions that are raised, and gather prayer requests and get them to the pastor. This has worked well and we will continue to look for ways to employ a more personal connection as we move forward. We have 3 Digital Deacons who rotate responsibilities.
2. Since some people don't have Facebook and others have a difficult time finding the Live video on Facebook, we purchased a widget from VidLive for $7 a month. This automatically posts the Livestream to our website at www.HopeOfChristChurch.org and anyone with an Internet connection can watch the stream. When the Livestream ends, the last broadcast stream remains available to users.
3. Worship Lyrics Videos has some of the more recent Praise Songs as well as Traditional Hymns available for $3.99 each. A CCLI License or One

License is needed with these videos. These videos are rarely removed by the web crawlers searching for unauthorized content.
4. Playback Media offers many of the videos from Worship House Media. At a price of $99/year, this is a tremendous savings.
5. A subscription to Sermon Central Pro ($149/yr) should be considered for the video content alone (countdowns, illustrations, stills, motion backgrounds).

We wonder whether a repository of technical helps like these is available anywhere. We've had to learn about these items through trial and error or dumb luck. Since our next step in developing an online connection is to address lighting issues, we wonder if there is expertise available from across the Synod that might make this task a little simpler. This undertaking has been a learning experience for us with a massive learning curve. We would be willing to share our expertise with others (and have already do so with a small church in St. Clair, Pa.)

Finally, we thank the Synod of the Trinity for investing in our small church and helping us to realize a goal we could not have imagined a year ago. We are so grateful for the financial support as we have taken this giant step outside of our comfort zone. Thank you!