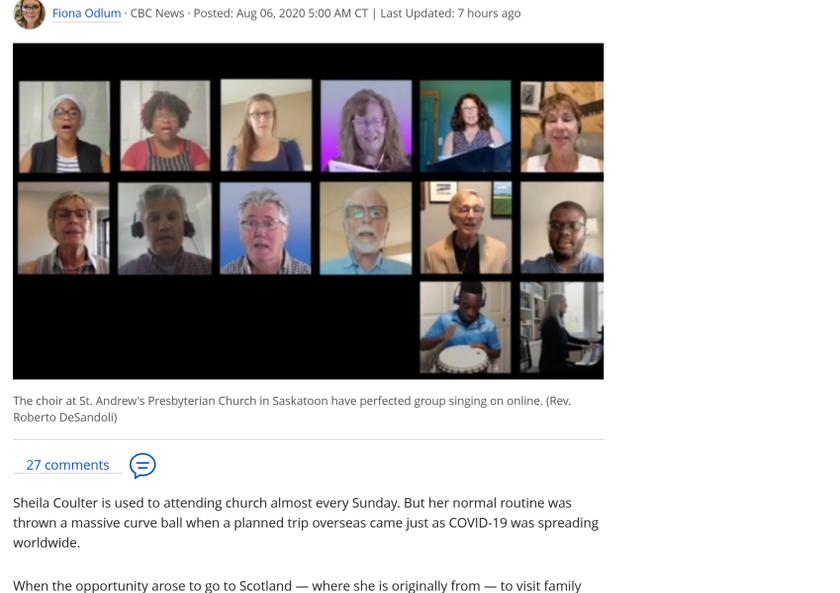


Saskatchewan COVID-19 pandemic sees people seeking out religious content from across the globe

200% increase in searches for 'daily prayer' in Canada during pandemic, according to YouTube

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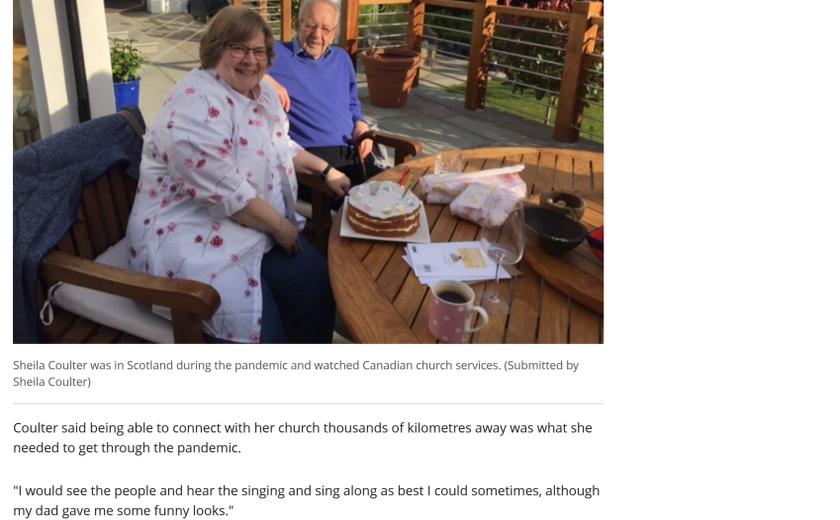
The choir at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Saskatoon have perfected group singing on online. (Rev. Roberto DeSandoli)

27 comments

Sheila Coulter is used to attending church almost every Sunday. But her normal routine was thrown a massive curve ball when a planned trip overseas came just as COVID-19 was spreading worldwide.

When the opportunity arose to go to Scotland — where she is originally from — to visit family and to watch some world-class curling, she jumped at the chance. Halfway through her flight on March 11, though, everything changed. Coulter was faced with the decision to either ride out the pandemic with her 90-year-old dad in Scotland or turn around and head back to her family in Saskatchewan. She chose to stay.

Scotland's pandemic rules were strict: during its peak residents could only leave their homes for one hour a day. Coulter would use that time to get her steps in at the local soccer pitch, exercise that also helped get her into the right frame of mind to watch Sunday services from back home in Saskatoon. She even checked in virtually to her local church in Scotland.



Sheila Coulter was in Scotland during the pandemic and watched Canadian church services. (Submitted by Sheila Coulter)

Coulter said being able to connect with her church thousands of kilometres away was what she needed to get through the pandemic.

"I would see the people and hear the singing and sing along as best I could sometimes, although my dad gave me some funny looks."

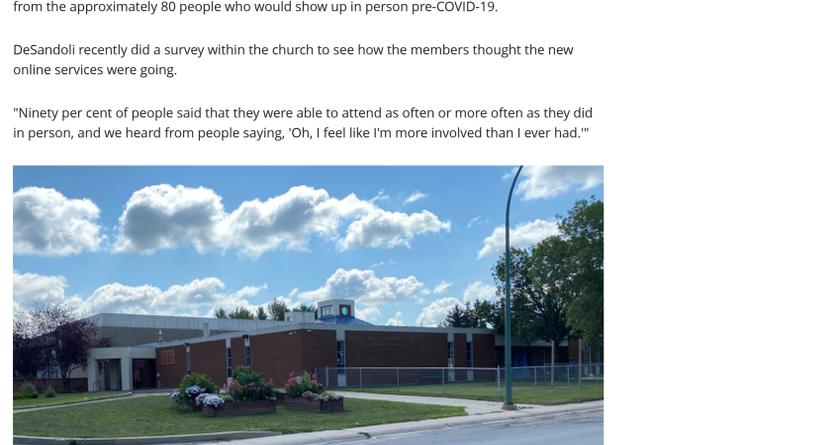
But the distance made it difficult, too.

"I got a bit homesick when I would see the sanctuary behind them," she said.

Churches are never really 'closed'

Roberto DeSandoli, the reverend at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Saskatoon, said that in the beginning, he didn't think he would ever close his church doors and moving to online services was a non-starter.

Once he realized the severity of the pandemic the decision was obvious, he said. First he tried Facebook Live services, then moved to pre-recorded ones, ironing out the kinks thanks in large part to his wife, who has a journalism degree. He's stuck with the pre-recorded option ever since.



Rev. Roberto DeSandoli says since moving online his congregation has almost doubled. (Rev. Roberto DeSandoli)

Now that they've survived the growing pains, DeSandoli feels proud of what the church is producing each week. He's even noticed his congregation growing.

"We get on Sunday between 40 and 60 screens — some of those with two or four people on them — and then by the end of the week, usually closer to 80 or 100 screens," he said. That's up from the approximately 80 people who would show up in person pre-COVID-19.

DeSandoli recently did a survey within the church to see how the members thought the new online services were going.

"Ninety per cent of people said that they were able to attend as often or more often as they did in person, and we heard from people saying, 'Oh, I feel like I'm more involved than I ever had.'"



Rabbi Parnes at Beth Jacob Synagogue says people from Australia and Montana are tuning in weekly. (CBC News)

Rabbi Jeremy Parnes at Beth Jacob Synagogue in Regina has had a similar experience. He said when he started his services online, he not only noticed an uptick in people tuning in, but their locations surprised him. One bar mitzvah had people watching from all over Canada and the United States. He now has regulars from British Columbia and even Australia.

In this together

According to YouTube, the uptick DeSandoli and Parnes's places of worship are experiencing is part of a broader trend: people are clicking more on religion. Andrew Peterson, the head of content partnerships at YouTube in Canada, said that since the pandemic hit, people's online searches for "daily prayer" have increased 200 per cent.

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"You don't need big crews. You don't need big budgets. All you need is a great idea and create a meaningful connection with an audience and the sky's the limit."

- Andrew Peterson, head of content partnerships, YouTube

Peterson said the pandemic launched a phenomenon called the "with me" trend where people "work out with me or cook with me or graduate with me. And on the religious side, obviously, pray and worship with me as well was huge."

And while YouTube has noticed a huge uptick in searches for religious content, it's not always the sites with the most polished content getting the biggest hits.

"You don't need big crews. You don't need big budgets," he said. "All you need is a great idea and create a meaningful connection with an audience and the sky's the limit."

In the same vein, it's not only churches, temples, mosques and synagogues going online that are getting attention. Ordinary people sharing their regular lives that just so happen to include religion are seeing similar results.

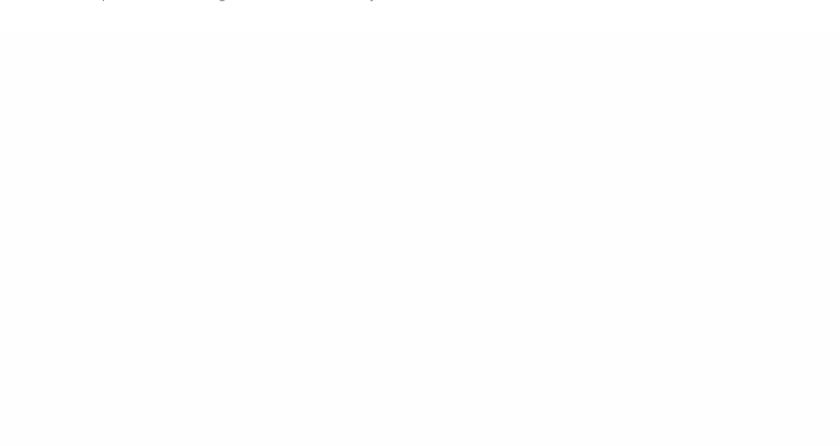
Religion broke the Internet

Canada's No. 1 Muslim YouTube family goes by the name "Anasala Family" online. Asala Maleh and Anas Marwah live in Ottawa. They aren't religious leaders and don't preach about religion, but they have a massive following interested in their daily videos of their regular lives as Muslim people. When the pandemic hit, they already had about 4.5 million followers.

Then, YouTube reached out and asked them to chronicle their journey through Ramadan. This got them millions of new followers, Maleh said.

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"I think what people needed was faith, because when you know there's no cure to such a pandemic, people started to break out. A lot of people fall back on spiritual beliefs, whether it's faith, religion — whatever it may be."



The Anasala Family are Canada's most-watched Muslim family, according to Youtube. (The Anasala Family/YouTube)

They now have 7,000,000 followers and their Ramadan video views set a Guinness world record.

Peterson said the "with me" trend is also spilling over into the world of celebrity.

"Who would have ever thought that, say, Dan Levy from *Schitt's Creek* and Jason Alexander from *Seinfeld* and Idina Menzel from *Frozen* would come together on YouTube to do a livestream of Saturday night Passover? I don't think we ever would have seen that five or 10 years ago."

Does this signal the death of physical churches?

Dr. Sami Helewa at the University of Regina's Campion College said the pandemic has been time for people to reflect on what is important in their lives. Religion has been a factor in that, but so too has the importance of social interaction, he said.

"People are social animals. ... And so I don't think that the Internet is going to completely supersede the traditional way of doing worship, service, etc.," he said.

"My sense is that indeed they are going to see some people going to drop from the worship services but new people will join in."

Parnes and DeSandoli said they miss the one-on-one connections they make in their places of worship and hope to have people back soon. But they both intend on continuing their online streaming as a complement to their traditional services. They see the value in reaching people at home who don't feel comfortable attending a service in person or can't for whatever reason.

As for Coulter, she said she can't wait to go back to her church in Saskatoon and sit among her fellow parishioners, but that when life gets busy or Mother Nature throws another curve ball at her, she will definitely be accessing the online options.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Fiona is a contributor at CBC Saskatchewan. She is from Winnipeg, Manitoba and that is where she started her broadcasting career over 15 years ago. Fiona has done everything from traffic reporting in a helicopter, to breaking news, anchoring and hosting talk radio across the country and telling weather stories.

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