

In the face of unrelenting snow, New England churches soldier on

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(RNS) New Englanders, clobbered by four major storms in the past month and bracing for a fifth, are finding it difficult to travel anywhere, including to services on Sundays.

Andrew Cryans of Durham, N.H.—where more than 45 inches of snow fell in the past week alone—can't help but notice that most of these meteorological whoppers have arrived on weekends, so that churchgoers might have a harder time getting to church than, say, school or work.

But the liturgy goes on, no matter how many show up, or how creative a pastor may have to get to connect with the flock. That can mean a priest snowshoes to work, or delivers a sermon via Facebook.

"I always tell parishioners that I live in the house behind the church, so it's easy for me," said Cryans, of St. Thomas More Catholic Church. "I'm here if you come and we will have mass no matter how few of you there are."

For St. Thomas More, that amounted to 28 people last Sunday morning, during a snowstorm. On a typical Sunday, the church expects at least 350.

In Hingham, Mass., where the National Guard has been brought in to help the seaside town dig out from more than 8 feet of snow, Peter Allen didn't want to cancel services at Hingham Congregational Church.

"We really count on having face-to-face time on Sunday mornings," he said. "But I've never witnessed anything like this."

So he let parishioners know that church would be open for anyone who felt it safe to make the journey.

“I told the church that I would snowshoe over and unlock the church and I’d be there to share a spiritual conversation and prayer—and one family did come,” Allen said.

For those who couldn’t make it, Allen posted an online video about Lent.

“It’s not as good as being there in person, but they know that church will continue,” he said, adding that more than 125 people braved the cold to bag 17,000 servings of food for the homeless in the church’s social hall the previous weekend.

“People felt a sense of obligation to make their way in the snow to get there,” he said, noticing that it was once again snowing outside his window. “Whatever frustration we’ve been having with the weather pales in comparison to a family trying to feed itself.”

Though recent snowfall in the South doesn’t rival the relentless storms that have buffeted New England, Southerners unaccustomed to the cold and icy roads have also had their decisions to make about whether to brave the weather for church.

Many pastors have advised their parishioners to stay home, or find a church closer to home until conditions improve.

As Thomas McKenzie of the Anglican Church of the Redeemer in Nashville told *The Tennessean* newspaper: “Jesus knows your heart—you don’t have to risk your life.”

Before the most recent Sunday snow hit, Alex Dyer of the Episcopal Church of St. Paul and St. James in New Haven, Conn., followed the forecast like a school superintendent trying to decide whether it’s going to be a snow day. Given the dire predictions, he decided—as he had before a particularly awful storm two years ago—to move the Sunday service to Facebook.

“I got on my clerical collar and sat in front of the computer” and taped a video in front of no one, said Dyer. “It’s a little weird and a little awkward, but part of ministry is getting out of your comfort zone.”

Dyer posted his video sermon, about the Transfiguration of Jesus and taking time to slow down in life, to the church’s Facebook page. He put the rest of the service on Facebook, too, every part in a separate post—from the opening hymn (a YouTube video of “Alleluia, Sing to Jesus”) to a reading from the Gospels to the announcements. There was even a virtual collection plate, a link that led to the church’s online donation page.

Dyer isn't sure how many people went to St. Paul and St. James through their computers, tablets, or phones on Sunday morning, but he had about 15 people e-mail him later about the service, and others who commented "Amen" on the page. One man—not a member of the congregation—called to thank Dyer for the service from Florida, where there was no snow but a wife suffering from cancer who could not make it to church.

A Facebook service can never replace a real service, but it's a useful tool, Dyer said. "The purpose of social media is to gather and connect people, and the purpose of the church is to gather God's people together."