

SpinChurch: An Innovative Church Outreach Program That Never Quite Got Its Wheels Spinning

It was an idea that everyone seemed to like. It certainly was intriguing- a combination of Spin Class and church. How would it work? What was the motivation behind it? From the very beginning, everyone who heard about it seemed to be interested. Here's what happened.

TryTank Experimental Laboratory

The idea for Spin Church was the brainchild of the team at *TryTank: An Experimental Laboratory for Church Growth and Innovation*.

Founded and led by Rev. Lorenzo Lebrija, the TryTank Experimental Lab was created as a research body charged with the task of understanding the forces threatening the church and identifying creative ways to combat these forces.

According to the Dean and Principal of the Virginia Theological Seminary, the Very Rev. Ian S. Markham, Ph.D, "This is an innovative moment in theological education for the Episcopal Church... We have sat around for long enough moaning about our predicaments; the time has come to try ideas and initiatives out."

With experiments like [Alexa Skill](#) (Creating a prayer leader out of Alexa to help people pray at home), [Apple News Prayer Feed](#), and [Digital Collection Plate](#), the focus of TryTank seems to be on using 21st century methods and technology to modernize the way the church operates, in an effort to equip future leaders to reinvigorate interest among young people.

SpinChurch

It was in this vein that Spin Church was created, while having less to do with modern technology than other experiments, the goal was to tap into young people from a different perspective:

*"There's something about fitness with young people..." says **Mother Anita, Priest at St. Anne's Church**. "There's something there that resonates with young people. We have seen the same thing with hiking, and walking, and I've found that with yoga".*

The idea was pretty straightforward- find a church that was willing to partner up with a spin studio and design a combination spin class/mass that can occur on a weekly basis.

Right away there were problems.

The experiment was originally set to take place in Los Angeles, where there is no shortage of churches or spin studios. To his amazement, however, Father Lorenzo was unable to make it work.

"Believe it or not, I was unable to find a willing partner in Los Angeles. We weren't able to find a single church that would partner with us and do this crazy experiment with us. That's why we ended up doing it in Rhode Island."

Unfortunately, having to move the experiment from Los Angeles to a state that was geographically less than half its size was a sign of things to come.

Still, Father Lorenzo was optimistic.

"Well I think any experiment can work, I'm just an optimistic guy. We knew it would be difficult because we were taking the thought that, 'people are spiritual, and if they're not going to church, they are finding their spirituality in other places'. So this was completely new, and it was not something that they normally thought of together- fitness class and mass."

And as a matter of fact, the interest WAS there, in theory at least. Engagement with the Facebook advertisement was "double what Facebook considers good engagement for an ad" according to **Father Lorenzo**.

*"People were intrigued by it, it got lots of attention online," says **Mother Anita**. "I thought it would work... it was interesting to combine something popular like spin class with worship, music, and reflection."*

Marketing the Project

By the time Father Lorenzo was able to find a willing church and corresponding spin studio, he had settled in on the little town of Newport, Rhode Island. This is where he met Rev'd Dr. Anita Louise Schell, Mother Anita, Rector in Charge at Emmanuele Church in Newport, Rhode Island. Together, they worked on the local marketing for SpinChurch.

*"By far the most positive experience of the entire thing was working with Lorenzo," says **Mother Anita**. "His data-driven and data-conscious approach was certainly something to behold, and I enjoyed learning from him."*



Hoping to target young people, they settled on and launched a paid marketing strategy through postcards, Instagram and Facebook. They decided to target three main demographics:

- **First Party**- this demographic was made up of TryTank Facebook & Instagram content engagers and page fans. Website visitors were retargeted to TryTank's SpinChurch Landing Page, meaning they would be shown ads for the SpinChurch landing page after leaving TryTank's website.
- **Lookalikes**- this demographic was made up of TryTank Facebook & Instagram content engagers and page fan "lookalikes", meaning they were determined to be good candidates based on their similarities to the demographic mentioned above.
- **Affinity**- this demographic was made up of a cross-section of three demographics:
 - Users who interact with or like spiritual pages
 - Users who are interested in exercise
 - Users who are fans of spinning

By the end of the second week, the campaign had reached a whopping 20,300 people on Facebook and Instagram, yielding 525 confirmed visits to the landing page. The highest performing demographic was the "Fans of Spinning" group with 172 landing page views, followed by the "Spiritual Fitness" users who visited the landing page 86 times.

However, there was just one problem.

*"Unfortunately, we didn't realize until two weeks in that the link to sign up was either broken or not easy enough to find, I'm not quite sure which it was," says **Mother Anita**. "There were other problems, but I think that killed us before we even got started."*

SpinChurch Launch

Technical difficulties notwithstanding, SpinChurch was getting a great deal of engagement online and everyone was excited for the launch. Then a peculiar thing happened...

Nobody showed up that wasn't already a member of Emmanuel Church.

Not in the sense that, barely anyone showed up; NOBODY showed up.

*"I wish I could have had a conversation to see where in the decision making process it didn't work. These weren't people who said they might show up, they actually committed to coming. It was very peculiar." **Father Lorenzo** was stumped.*

*"I wish we would have started with a core group of people who were committed to doing it," said **Mother Anita**. "You need to have people that are there with you and excited about it. You don't want someone taking a chance and showing up, just to think to themselves, 'gee, am I the only one who came out?'"*

*"I tried to get them on the phone, but not one of the people who committed to going would talk to me about it," said **Father Lorenzo**. "I even offered them \$25 for a conversation!"*

Still, some people from the church did show up, and for them it was a great time. They rented the spin studio for two hours on a Saturday afternoon, and everyone would show up and get ready for spin class from 4:15-5:00 PM.



Afterwards, everyone would clean up and change, and they would hold a mass afterwards in the studio. Refreshments were served, then a Gospel reading, and finally the Eucharist. The entire process took about two hours.

*"Nobody was required to stay for the entire time. We were very careful during the spin portion to watch the language so it wasn't TOO religious. We tried to make it as non-denominational as possible so as not to scare anyone away", said **Mother Anita**. "Class was lead by different teachers week to week, and we played inspirational music while spinning and building community. If anyone wanted to stay for the mass, they were welcome to, but it wasn't required."*



What Went Wrong?

Everyone thought it was an interesting idea, social media engagement was higher than expected, and those who did go enjoyed SpinChurch immensely. So what happened?

*"Interestingly enough, it was the spin crowd (the most engaged demographic on social media) that didn't show up," says **Father Lorenzo**. "I think it may have been because we ran it on Saturday afternoons. Reflecting back on it, there must be a reason why the spin studio was available at that time, and it turns out it's because that's a time that nobody wants to go to spin class."*

Added Mother Anita:

"When it comes down to it, I think there were three main things that worked against us. One, we were not very well connected, technologically. Sure we had the ads and the postcards and the inquiries, but when people tried to sign up they ran into problems, and that was that."

She continued:

"Two, I wish we would have started with a core group of people who were committed to doing it and promoting it and talking it up from the very beginning. It was cool and interesting and different, but there should have been a group of people who assured newcomers that it wasn't THAT weird, and that they should try it too."

She went on:

"And finally, it was springtime, Saturday afternoon in Rhode Island. In hindsight, I couldn't think of a worse time to run an experiment like this. We had a particularly rough winter, and people just wanted to enjoy the outdoors. They wanted to have picnics, they wanted to go to the beach. Spin class- church or otherwise- was not on anybody's mind on Saturday afternoon in the springtime in Rhode Island."

Father Lorenzo had another interesting theory as well:

"I get the feeling that those who have found their spiritual home in a fitness class, have already found it. The members of the church were always going to show up, so as it turns out, we were really trying to convert spinners into church goers. They've already found their spirituality in spinning. They've already chosen to do that in lieu of going to church."

Lessons Learned

Was SpinChurch a failure?

*"No, not at all!" says **Mother Anita**. "I met a lot of great people and I experienced something I never would have experienced otherwise. SpinChurch is a precious memory for me!"*

Added Father Lorenzo:

"Remember we were in a tiny community. Within this tiny community, we were hoping to find overlap between several even smaller communities, and it just wasn't meant to be"

He added:

"Could it work elsewhere? I definitely think so. I think we learned that we would need to find a champion within the congregation to promote it and get people excited about it."

*"It goes back to what I said earlier about having a core group of people," said **Mother Anita**. "It might work, but we need to have people who are committed so that the new people feel they are stepping into something legitimate. Beyond that, we would also need to do it at a better time, and of course make sure the link is working when people actually want to sign up!"*

"I actually think someone could open up a dedicated SpinChurch. What we did was try to fit one in during what essentially amounted to 'off hours' of an existing Spin Studio,"

says **Father Lorenzo**. *"But I think if someone were so inclined, they could open and market a SpinChurch with the understanding that they are a spin studio for most of the week, and have mass on Sunday that is open to everyone. I believe it could work."*

One thing is for certain- nobody regrets trying SpinChurch. It may be listed as a "failed" experiment according to TryTank's records, but Father Lorenzo says they learned a lot about methodology, marketing, and other things that will be immensely helpful moving forward with other experiments.

Mother Anita has since moved on to become a Priest at another church, but she says she wouldn't give up a single moment of her experience. Even though it may not have taken off as its own thing, she was very happy with the community that was built among the regular churchgoers who participated. In fact, she thinks it could be something that established churches could do to change things up every once in a while.

"Hey, this sunday instead of having traditional mass in church, we're going to go to spin class. Or do yoga. Or go on a hike. Like I said, there's something about fitness and young people, and if I learned anything from SpinChurch, it's that fitness could be that angle we need to bring our youth back to church!"