

From COVID to QAnon, church makes disinformation training a question of faith | MPR News

By Catharine Richert

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Rachel Wightman reviews slides Oct. 18 before a Mill City Church online class about identifying disinformation. The church offered a class earlier in the year and recently began offering the class again for six weeks online.

Finding facts and accurate information is part of Rachel Wightman's job — it's also part of her ministry.

She works as a librarian at Concordia University in St. Paul, but on a recent Sunday afternoon, Wightman was on a Zoom video chat, teaching eight of her fellow congregants from Mill City Church in Minneapolis how the complicated algorithms that pull data from their internet searches and their clicks influence what they see online — including disinformation.

"The way these algorithms work, they're predicting behaviors," she explained. "They're saying, 'Oh, you've clicked on all these things, so maybe you want to see more of them.'"

Rachel Wightman leads a discussion about identifying disinformation during an online Mill City Church class. Mill City Church is holding a class for its parishioners about how the information landscape intersects with faith. The class covered topics like evaluating sources, finding different viewpoints and tools to use to verify information.

In a year dominated by disinformation about the pandemic and politics, Mill City pastor Stephanie Williams O'Brien said giving her congregants the tools to identify it, avoid spreading it — and find accurate information is particularly important.

Exploring the intersection between disinformation and faith are essential to Mill City's mission of loving their neighbors, in real life and online, Williams O'Brien said.

"When we spread misinformation, that is not loving, that is not kind," she said. "It doesn't help other people grow and thrive. If our deepest heart is to love people well, then spreading disinformation is a very toxic thing to do."

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