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## Annual Report – First Seventeen Months

*The Bootstrap Start-Up Phase*

October 1, 2024 – February 28, 2026

### From the Executive Director

Seventeen months ago, [Firebird Spirit](http://Firebird Spirit) stepped into the digital landscape with a simple conviction: that thoughtful, justice-rooted spiritual formation could live online without losing depth, reverence, or relational integrity.

We began with a question: What would it look like to build a spiritual community for people who feel spiritually curious, theologically displaced, and/or geographically isolated?

Since October 1, 2024, that question has taken form in weekly worship, Bible study, music, and theological reflection. It has taken form in measurable growth, steady engagement, and the consistent rhythm of a global community gathering each week.

As this platform matured, we recognized a parallel institutional need. Congregations are navigating staffing shortages, production strain, and cultural transition. Firebird Spirit's next chapter is about strengthening infrastructure so this work can scale responsibly in concert with our digital development.

This report outlines what has been built, what has been learned, and what is possible in the next twenty-four months.

With appreciation,

Deborah Fae Swift, Executive Director

March 1, 2026

## Executive Overview

Firebird Spirit is a digital-first community platform building scalable infrastructure for belonging in an era marked by social fragmentation, congregational instability, and rising loneliness.

Launched as a dedicated online media initiative on October 1, 2024, Firebird Spirit produces weekly inclusive worship services, short-form theological commentary, music releases, Bible study programming, and congregational resource tools. We now have produced more than 1,000 short- and long-form videos on our channel. What began as an experiment in digital spiritual formation has grown into a consistent global platform reaching viewers in **42 countries**, with **more than 300,000 cumulative views and over 6,500 subscribers within its first seventeen months**.

Engagement growth over the past six months has accelerated significantly from the six months prior:

- **Viewership** increased by **106%**
- **Subscriber** growth rose by **191%**
- **Watch hours** increased by **57%**

These metrics reflect not only reach, but sustained participation.

Firebird Spirit operates with a distributed volunteer network of more than 30 contributors — including worship leaders, Messengers, musicians, readers, and advisors — supported by three core volunteer staff members providing operational leadership. This collaborative model blends theological depth, digital systems design, and measurable analytics to ensure both relational authenticity and operational sustainability.

In response to growing demand from congregations navigating staffing shortages and production limitations, Firebird Spirit recently launched the **Worship Supply Kit (WSK)**, a modular resource enabling churches to continue gathering consistently while reducing logistical strain. The organization is also developing a **Regional Ministry Partner Program** to expand equitable access to the WSK across networks.

**Firebird Spirit is now transitioning from a bootstrap start-up phase into Phase Two: a sustainability model** designed to stabilize leadership capacity, strengthen digital infrastructure, expand congregational support, and deepen measurable impact.

At its core, Firebird Spirit addresses a widening civic challenge: the erosion of consistent gathering spaces. By integrating digital innovation with embodied community support, the organization builds infrastructure that sustains connection across geography, theology, and generation. Anchor partnerships and strategic grant investments will enable Firebird Spirit to solidify this next phase of growth and ensure that scalable community-building infrastructure remains accessible to those navigating transition, isolation, or limited local resources.

## Program Snapshot – Firebird Spirit at a Glance

### Firebird Spirit’s Core Work

- **Digital Community Formation** — weekly worship, theological reflection, music, and online learning.
- **Congregational Support Infrastructure** — the Worship Supply Kit (WSK), enabling congregations to sustain weekly gathering during staffing transitions and institutional change.

(October 2024 – February 2026)

#### As of 2/28/2026:

- Viewers in 42 countries
- 300,000+ cumulative views
- 6,500+ subscribers

#### In the past six months:

- 106% increase in viewership
- 191% increase in subscriber growth
- 57% increase in watch hours

This growth reflects increasing demand for accessible, theologically inclusive digital worship and congregational support.

### What This Means

Firebird Spirit now functions in two complementary ways:

#### 1. Standalone Digital Ministry

Through weekly worship, Bible study, themed teaching arcs, music, and discussion groups, individuals who may feel isolated — geographically or spiritually — are finding connection.

#### 2. Worship Supply Kit (WSK)

Congregations facing clergy burnout, staffing shortages, or production limitations can access:

- Full-service worship videos and sermon manuscripts
- Editable liturgical scripts and graphics
- Music resources with licensing guidance
- Technical onboarding and support
- Flexible use in in-person, hybrid, or digital contexts

### Looking Ahead

Over the next 24 months, Firebird Spirit will:

- Expand WSK partnerships to 8–12/year
- Strengthen onboarding systems for partner churches
- Deepen engagement in online groups
- Build replicable digital systems to serve multiple congregations simultaneously

## The Social Context: Isolation, Trust & Belonging

Across the United States and much of the English-speaking world, social researchers have documented rising levels of loneliness, declining institutional trust, reduced civic participation, and increasing fragmentation across political, generational, and geographic lines. Older adults report shrinking social networks. Younger adults report digital hyper-connection paired with relational disconnection. Faith communities, once reliable gathering spaces, face clergy burnout, declining membership, and aging congregations.

The result is not simply theological change — it is structural thinning of consistent gathering spaces.

*“This has become the one place each week where I feel connected and not alone.”*

— Online participant

For decades, local congregations functioned as predictable weekly sites of connection, mutual care, and community identity. As staffing shortages, production demands, and institutional decline accelerate, many small congregations are forced to reduce programming, cancel services, or close entirely. When gathering rhythms disappear, social isolation deepens — particularly in rural areas and among aging populations.

At the same time, digital environments often amplify *noise* rather than cultivate *trust*.

Firebird Spirit responds to this dual challenge by building stable, repeatable gathering rhythms that bridge digital reach and embodied community. Weekly worship services, Bible study cohorts, grief support groups, short-form commentary, and modular congregational resources function not as isolated content pieces but as relational anchors.

Digital infrastructure becomes a tool for restoring consistency. Consistency rebuilds trust. Trust supports belonging.

In this context, Firebird Spirit is not simply producing media. It is strengthening the connective tissue that allows dispersed individuals and struggling congregations to remain in relationship — across geography, theology, and generation.

## Worship Supply Kit (WSK):

### Extending Our Weekly Rhythm to Congregations

Each week, Firebird Spirit produces a fully developed worship experience as part of our ongoing digital rhythm — including liturgy, sermon, music, visual elements, and theological framing. What began as a resource for our global online community quickly revealed its broader potential.

Congregations navigating staffing shortages, clergy transitions, or production limitations began asking a practical question: *Could these weekly offerings be adapted for local use?*

The [Worship Supply Kit \(WSK\)](#) emerged directly from that need.

Rather than creating separate content for congregations, the WSK extends the same thoughtfully crafted weekly worship experience already developed for our online community — making it accessible, adaptable, and scalable for local contexts. It transforms a single weekly digital production into congregational infrastructure.

The WSK provides:

- Full downloadable worship video
- Editable liturgy and sermon manuscripts
- Music files and licensing guidance
- Downloadable graphics and bulletin materials
- Technical onboarding support

Congregations may implement the service fully, use selected elements, or adapt materials to fit their own style and leadership structure. The system is intentionally modular and designed for in-person, hybrid, or digital settings.

In this way, Firebird Spirit does not replace local ministry. It strengthens it — reducing production strain while preserving theological depth and creative integrity. By lowering the logistical barriers that often force small congregations to cancel services or reduce gathering frequency, the WSK empowers communities — many with average ages of 70 and above — to continue meeting in person, week after week.

In an era marked by increasing loneliness and social fragmentation, the steady continuation of local, embodied gathering matters. Digital infrastructure becomes a support system that sustains physical community, ensuring that connection is not lost simply because staffing or production capacity has become fragile. Sustaining consistent, local gathering spaces is a quiet but powerful antidote to isolation.

To increase accessibility, Firebird Spirit is developing a **Regional Ministry Partner Program**, allowing judicatory bodies or aligned institutions to subsidize participation for congregations within their care. This structure distributes support across networks rather

than concentrating burden on individual churches, strengthening both regional ecosystems and local resilience.

## Institutional Consulting & Adaptive Support

In October 2024, Firebird personnel continued a twelve-year consultation practice pioneered by Firebird team members, and engaged in a three-day on-site consultation with a congregation in Rahway, New Jersey, exploring adaptive use of space, community-based mission strategy, and long-term sustainability planning. As the congregation considered relocation of primary worship space and reimagining its building footprint, Firebird facilitated discernment, program clarification, and neighborhood alignment.

This engagement reflects Firebird Spirit's broader capacity: supporting congregations not only through digital resource delivery, but through strategic accompaniment during institutional transition.

## Digital Ministry as Community Innovation

Traditional brick-and-mortar ministry models require significant physical, staffing, and financial overhead — pressures that are intensifying as many congregations face declining membership and rising operational costs.

Across the United States and much of the Western world, the landscape of brick-and-mortar congregations is undergoing profound change. Research from the Pew Research Center and other national surveys has documented a steady decline in formal religious affiliation, alongside rising maintenance costs and aging congregational membership. As a result, many faith communities are downsizing, merging, or selling long-standing church buildings that once anchored neighborhood life. The question facing many spiritual leaders is no longer simply how to grow congregations, but how to preserve spaces for spiritual development, ethical reflection, and communal belonging in an era marked by social isolation and rising loneliness.

Digital-first infrastructure enables broader reach with scalable efficiency — but infrastructure alone does not create community.

Firebird Spirit integrates theological depth, creative collaboration, and digital systems design to cultivate sustainable community across digital and local contexts.

Standardized workflows, repeatable onboarding processes, and measurable analytics ensure that growth is sustainable rather than dependent on individual heroic effort. Technology supports the work; people animate it.

This blended model represents adaptive community infrastructure: cost-effective and geographically expansive, yet relationally grounded — capable of supporting multiple congregations simultaneously while preserving authenticity, collaboration, and human connection.

## Financial Context & Stabilization

**Initial \$10,000 start-up loan** repaid in full.

**Estimated annual program value (in-kind labor):** ~\$129,000.

**Proposed annual stabilization budget:** ~\$110,000.

**Reserve goal (3 months):** ~\$27,500.

**Total stabilization target:** ~\$137,500.

The proposed stabilization budget reflects formalization of leadership roles, technology infrastructure, and administrative capacity required to sustain demonstrated growth.

Firebird Spirit is governed by a Board of Directors and supported by an Executive Advisory Council with experience in finance, community development, technology, theology, program creation, and nonprofit leadership.

### Sustainability Pathway

Firebird Spirit's stabilization plan is designed as a **24–36 month transition** from a bootstrap volunteer model to a diversified revenue structure. During this period, **Anchor Partnerships** and strategic grants will formalize leadership capacity and infrastructure. Over time, sustainability will be supported through a blended model including Worship Supply Kit participation fees, Regional Ministry Partner commitments, individual donor growth, and select program-specific grants.

In February 2026, Firebird Spirit launched the **Sustaining Circle**, a recurring donor community designed to build grassroots stability alongside institutional support. Early participants in the first 100-member cohort — designated the **Pioneer Circle** — are providing consistent monthly contributions that reinforce the organization's diversified funding base.

While still in its early phase, the Sustaining Circle represents an important structural shift: sustainability supported not only by major Anchor partners and grants, but by individuals who experience the work directly and choose to invest in its continuation. Over time, recurring donor participation will provide predictable operating support and reduce reliance on any single funding stream.

The **long-term goal** is not indefinite reliance on transitional funding, but a diversified base in which no single funding stream carries disproportionate weight.

Together, institutional Anchor investment and distributed recurring support create a balanced model of shared responsibility.

### Additional Documentation

Detailed two-year pro-forma budgets, governance information, program metrics, and supplemental data are available upon request. Firebird Spirit is committed to financial transparency and collaborative partnership.

## Anchor Partnership Invitation

Firebird Spirit seeks **Anchor Partners** committed to strengthening scalable digital community infrastructure at a time of increasing social isolation and congregational instability.

Anchor Partners serve as early stabilizing investors in Firebird Spirit's transition from start-up operations to sustainable Phase Two growth.

Anchor commitments begin at \$20,000 over two years and represent catalytic stabilization funding.

Firebird Spirit anticipates engaging multiple Anchor Partners to collectively stabilize and scale operations.

Anchor investment enables Firebird to:

- Stabilize core leadership capacity to sustain weekly programming
- Expand access to the Worship Supply Kit for congregations navigating transition
- Strengthen digital production and delivery infrastructure
- Reduce cost barriers for small and aging congregations seeking to continue gathering in person
- Support measurable growth in engagement across geographically dispersed communities

Anchor Partners receive periodic updates including growth metrics, program developments, financial transparency summaries, and documented engagement outcomes. Expanded partnership levels are available in alignment with institutional capacity and mission priorities.

## Conclusion: Infrastructure for Belonging

The first seventeen months of Firebird Spirit’s digital-first programming represent a bootstrap start-up phase built almost entirely through volunteer leadership, creative collaboration, and a shared conviction that meaningful spiritual community can flourish in digital spaces. What began as an experiment in online gathering has grown into a global platform connecting individuals and supporting congregations navigating a time of profound institutional transition. The work outlined in this report reflects not simply content creation, but the careful curated development of infrastructure capable of sustaining belonging across geography, generation, and theological perspective.

### About Firebird Spirit

- **Founded: 2014** – Started as an Act of Faith of South Presbyterian Church in Rochester, New York
  - 2018** – Formed as an independent corporation for consulting in institutional development
  - October 1, 2024** – Creation of online digital expansion offerings
- **Headquarters:** Rochester, New York
- **Legal status:** Firebird Spirit, Inc. (501(c)3 nonprofit licensed in NYS)
- **Mission:** Firebird Spirit creates digital and embodied gathering spaces where spiritual curiosity, justice-centered faith, and creative collaboration flourish across geography, theology, and generation.
- **Primary programs:** weekly online inclusive worship, Water from the Well Bible study, Firebird Dispatch/short-form commentary, short-form videos (prayers, reflections and meditations), music releases, and the Worship Supply Kit (WSK).

Firebird Spirit operates at the intersection of digital innovation, inclusive theological engagement, and civic renewal. In a time marked by social fragmentation, clergy burnout, aging congregations, and rising loneliness, consistent gathering spaces — both digital and embodied — are not optional. They are stabilizing forces.

Through scalable weekly programming, distributed volunteer collaboration, congregational resource development, and measurable digital engagement, Firebird Spirit is building adaptive community infrastructure for a changing era.

This work is not episodic. It is structural.

Anchor investment allows Firebird Spirit to move from a bootstrap start-up model into sustainable Phase Two operations — strengthening leadership capacity, expanding congregational access, and preserving gathering spaces where belonging can take root.

Infrastructure for belonging is not abstract. It is built intentionally, maintained steadily, and shared collaboratively.

**Firebird Spirit is prepared for the next phase of that work.**

*“I find the work that Firebird Spirit is doing to be deeply interesting, faithful, and invigorating.”*

— The Rev. Amy Williams Fowler