

On-line Church

The C-19 lockdown has put the church into a position where it has had to cater quickly for the changed situation and try to minister to as many people as possible without any direct contact. This has resulted in a number of different approaches, including YouTube videos, Facebook services, and social apps, of which Zoom is by far the most prevalent.

These have proved to be effective ways of keeping in contact with many church folk, but it is important to bear in mind that there is a significant majority, particularly among the older generation, who do not use computers or smart phones, and are therefore being excluded. Even when services do start again in some form, we may well find that such people continue to isolate for a longer period while there is still a risk involved in meeting. Under the current situation, it is essential that we develop other ways of making contact – of which the most obvious is the ordinary phone call.

On-line Worship Survey

Over the last couple of weeks I have initiated a short survey to find out how our on-line offerings are appreciated. Now that I have had over 50 responses, it is possible to see a few trends which are worth being aware of.

- Most respondents (84%) are already regular church attenders, which makes it harder to find out how on-line services reach those who are not regular attenders. Just a few responded that they did not like on-line services and chose not to watch them at all. A national survey has suggested that 1-in-4 have turned to a church service, but practically I have no way of making contact with these and finding what they liked or disliked.
- By far the majority (60%) were mainly using YouTube, with Zoom (30%) in second place, and Facebook third (22%), although quite a few were using several different media each week. Only a few were engaged with the BBC service, '*Songs of Praise*' or '*Thought for the Day*' on the radio. Most respondents had settled into a weekly pattern, and over half were engaging in several different services each week – and quite often one was with a church that was not their regular parish.
- About half (48%) found the services '*very worshipful*', but quite a few (30%) who only found services through the media '*slightly worshipful*', and the remainder didn't engage well.
- Most (62%) watched the whole service and found it easy to follow, but quite a number (32%) admitted that their attention wandered and they either skipped some or switched off before the end. From the comments it would appear that something with multiple contributors was felt to be better than a monologue. There is clearly quite an issue about people's limited attention span on the media.
- Clearly the most enjoyable was to be able to see other members of the church/congregation, and seeing the children was mentioned quite a few times. Music was appreciated by some, but clearly that has presented technical difficulties in some churches, and there is a clear divide between those who want more traditional hymns, those who want more contemporary songs, and those who think the music side of things does not really work.

- There was also a clear divide between people who enjoyed the talks, and those who least enjoyed them!
- Respondents struggled most with technical problems, especially on Zoom, where issues of sound, cutting out, etc. were frequently mentioned. Few people found it easy to sing along with the music offered, and several struggled with just hearing the minister singing! One specific issue was that very few appreciated a communion service where only the priest took the bread and wine, and many felt excluded.
- Overall most respondents were very appreciative of whatever their church had been able to offer. Some would like more variety in the leaders, and for the music to be better. There were interesting thoughts about churches working together, perhaps across a benefice or in a particular locality – both for sharing leadership and talents, and for getting to know each other.
- In this category there was a clear divide between those who were involved in quite a number of things, particularly Zoom, and they were generally members of PCC or other committees, and those who were only involved watching one Sunday service. Quite a few had a good house group up and running, again mainly via Zoom, and this is probably an area that could be developed. A small number of people did not like on-line meetings and had backed out altogether.

'Varieties of gifts ...'

For myself, I am actually involved in two separate parishes, both rural, and both of which happen to be in interregnum at present.

One has a normal congregation of at least 150 and has been offering several things, including on-line YouTube services and daily Zoom prayer meetings which gather up to 50 people. Also there are two Facebook reflections each week. They are blessed to have the technical ability to create varied services and to produce their own music. I don't know exact statistics, but it seems that a high proportion of members are engaging with one or other of these offerings, and it would also appear that quite a few non-church folk are engaging with the lighter items such as the Facebook thoughts (a reflection of mine put up last week had over a thousand views).

The other has no more than 50 attending on a Sunday, and has struggled, but now produces a Sunday evening service via Zoom, a weekly short service recorded in church on Facebook, and also a weekly Zoom prayer meeting. Sadly the numbers attending all of these are considerably lower than the Sunday attendance, even though a higher number must have computers as they receive the weekly notice sheet via email.

Obviously part of the difference is that the former church have quite a good number of gifted lay people who can speak in public, fiddle with technology, and are highly motivated professional people. By contrast the smaller congregation are an older and more passive group of people.

Another difference is that the larger church was already engaging in forms of ministry using social media, whereas in the smaller church the previous priest had rejected all forms of social media as being of any use for reaching out to the

community – so after lockdown this church had a standing start rather than already being on the move.

Of particular interest is the number of 'views'.

The larger church regularly has 2–300 views on their 50-minute YouTube service which is modern, varied and has a good pace. That is something like double their normal Sunday attendance.

The smaller church has been getting only about a dozen at their live Zoom service, but up to 90 watching the Facebook offerings – also nearly double the normal Sunday attendance. But what is particularly interesting is that they have split their service into two separate videos each week, one with a ten-minute service of the word, and one with a five-minute sermon. Each week I note that far more people are watching the service than the talk!

I also noticed that when the smaller church offered just a short recording of the choir singing a blessing, the viewing figures doubled as over against a service!

Those who set up sites can often also get statistics, and it is interesting to note that many people only watch part of a post. For example, I noted that a 4-minute talk on Facebook had 114 viewers, but the average watch time was only 27 seconds! Part of this can be explained by the odd feature of Facebook videos sometimes starting to play when people did not click on them, and thus only registering 2–3 seconds.

But this does raise the interesting observation about concentration. One church puts up a weekly reading and reflection on its web page – in written form for people to read through, along with a collect and prayer for the week. Looking at the statistics of that web site, I note that the average length of time that people stay on a page is significantly less than it would take to read it. So people are either reading part of the page and giving up, or just skimming over it reading parts.

Stephen's Observations

May I offer a few observations on the use of the media that all churches need to consider.

1. Social media is here to stay It has become the main means of communication for the majority of society, and even when lockdown ends, the church must continue to inhabit this forum if we are to reach a wider constituency. Therefore, whether we personally like it or not, as leaders we are going to have to learn to use it effectively, and build our own networks and contacts. I'm not suggesting that it will replace worship services, but it will need to become one of our tools.

2. The world of social media is an instant and immediate one, and is also a very visual place. A few decades ago, a programme like 'News at Ten' was basically one news reader sitting behind a desk and reading the whole script, with rarely any pictures. But today, there is never a camera shot that lasts as long as 20 seconds, and even then the camera is probably slowly moving, and it is probably interrupted by a graphic or video clip. People's attention span seems to be far shorter than when attending church. We need to learn to speak in 'sound bites' rather than

lengthy diatribes. If we are offering services, with the hope that they grab non-church people, they really do need to be more varied than just a single person doing the whole thing from one camera position.

3. The larger church seems to have all the advantages – skilled people, more leaders, etc – but I actually see the biggest advantage is in that they had engaged with social media in an attractive way *before* the lockdown came about. They already had a lively and interesting Facebook page, whereas the smaller church only used Facebook for rather dull notices and re-posting of Diocesan posts that were really intended for church people, not for a wider audience.

4. To cope with all this, **we are all going to have to gain some confidence** in speaking to a camera (or smart phone), in preparing short scripts, and in thinking of ways to enhance words with visual things. And some of us are going to have to learn about editing video clips.

5. Despite the hype about new opportunities and numbers of people viewing services, there is still a very big challenge ahead in trying to **engage with those who are not already committed** church people. It doesn't 'just happen', and people don't connect with a service without some encouragement or reason.

Homework

And now a couple of things for you to develop before next week.

1. Having read the above, do you feel that the church in general, and your parish in particular, welcome the recent developments as a new opportunity for mission, or are longing for things to just get back to normal?

2. One of the key issues is people's decreasing attention span. Why do you think we have this trend in society?

3. A couple of survey responses suggested that we may need to work together, sharing ideas, skills and leaders – perhaps as a benefice group or a locality. Do you think this could work, or are we each too intent on promoting our own particular church in a competitive way?

4. What would you personally be wishing to do more of in this brave new world?

5. And a little exercise – this Sunday could you try to watch an on-line service from a different church to that which you normally watch, ideally from a different position on the theological spectrum. Was it open and welcoming for the visitor? What could we learn from them?

One possibility might be 'GK Church' on YouTube at 10.45 am.

Please would you write either a short paragraph on each of these, or two or three bullet points, and email them back to me by the end of Sunday 28th. We can then collate the main and share them around.

Stephen Hardy – 20th June 2020