



Recently, we held Digital In A Rural Parish webinar where we discussed some of the digital challenges faced by those in rural settings. Rev Sam Mann shared with us on how podcasts have been used successfully to engage church-goers in a new way, and as an alternative to live-streaming or video services. We invited him to share more on how they have done this.

I was finishing off my Curacy in a semi-rural setting when the first lockdown was sprung upon us in early 2020. Like a lot of clergy in the Church of England, I had a go at recording video services from my own home, using equipment as basic as a sixth-generation iPod touch and a make-shift tripod made from a pile of books. For a while, this went well.

However, Curacy ended last summer and now I minister to four parishes in a very different context. I wanted to try something a little different to keep people connected digitally if another lockdown were to be imposed, but I wasn't sure what form this would take. The inspiration came from a conversation with a parent at our local C of E primary school during a governor's meeting. I floated the idea of providing something 'audio-only', and her reaction was to say 'Oh, I love podcasts!'. Another parent shared a similar sentiment, 'They're great because I can be doing something else while listening'.

This got me thinking. Maybe podcast-type worship is a good digital alternative for families in a rural setting who have to juggle different tasks. Moreover, engagement with the audio-only digital world has been growing for a while, especially thinking of the success of Audible, podcasts on Spotify, BBC Sounds, and Clubhouse. But, what about those in our parishes who don't have access to the internet? Again, podcasts can provide a solution.

What kind of platform?

For me, [Soundcloud](#) provides the most user-friendly experience for both listeners and uploaders. It's easy to create a personal profile. You can customise the cover photo, profile name, picture, and individual pictures for each upload. What's more, Soundcloud offers a basic plan that is entirely free, as long as you stay within the storage limit. You can have roughly 8 or so tracks stored on your profile at any one time. Helpfully, a graphic at the right-hand side of your profile homepage lets you know when you are getting a bit close! When you get to this point, simply delete the oldest track when you upload a new one. This works for me!

What kind of format?

I began by structuring each podcast loosely on the **Service of The Word** framework, with quite simple congregational responses that you can explain as they occur. However, this began to feel a bit repetitive, so I simplified things further. Now, each recording begins with a short introduction and prayer, one or two appointed readings from the lectionary, a sermon, some prayers, and a blessing. This lasts between 15 and 20 minutes (I would not recommend anything longer). You will know what kind of format will be most appropriate for your context.

How to record

Most modern PCs, laptops and some tablets have fairly good quality microphones built-in. I use a Windows PC and simply open **Voice Recorder** from the start menu. Then I hit record and we are away! Top tip: you don't need to record the whole thing in one go. See below!

How to edit

This is the bit that sounds daunting but doesn't have to be. Confidence in editing makes things easier in the long term. It means that you can record little bits at a time, knowing that you can glue them together afterwards. It also enables other voices to be heard. Perhaps a congregation member could lead the prayers or reading and send you their recording. Maybe you could have a guest preacher (my diocesan bishop recently sent me a recorded sermon to glue in). Editing means that you don't have to sit down and record a whole 20-minute podcast episode. You can take your time.

For editing, I use **Audacity**. It is free, open-source audio editing software that can be downloaded for both Windows and Mac. Their website includes helpful hints, tips, and instructions. It is also worth searching for tutorials on YouTube.

How to distribute

Each Sunday, I email the podcast link out on an email list I have gradually put together during my first six months here. Listeners also have the option to **Follow** you on Soundcloud, meaning they will receive a notification each week, without the need to be emailed. Also, the email is accompanied by a script, or written version of the reflection, for members of the community to pass on to those who might struggle with the internet.

Going forward

As we return to worship in the building, I plan to continue providing weekly podcast episodes. I feel that this could help those who might not be comfortable in returning just yet, and also provide a nice supplement to the weekly sermon. Maybe there is something that you wished you could have explored more in your sermon in church, but didn't quite have the time? Is there a series that you want to run alongside the weekly sermon? Could this be a way of combining the physical and digital in ministry?

Revd Sam Man

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