

During the past year, churches have been experimenting with technology and software to support their online services. It would be fair to say that no church community has approached it in the same way, reflecting the uniqueness of each, and the broad range of diversity across the country. Rev'd Richard England from Crofton Parish has taken a creative approach to their online services. They would say their digital journey is not over yet, exploring the potential of a hybrid approach to church services as they emerge from lockdown.

Like you, I will never forget March 2020. Without looking at my diary, I can tell you that it was a five Sunday month. Over those five Sundays, we trialled four different ways of gathering as a church community while the pandemic hit. The fifth Sunday was live-streamed from our living room, which would become our default mode of gathering for the next few months of Lockdown 1.0.

Crofton Parish is on the Hampshire coast, part of the Diocese of Portsmouth. We're a larger church, with a Sunday attendance of 250-300 (with 50-70 at our second church). As Vicar, I'm fortunate to have an outstanding team of volunteers and staff.

Pre-pandemic, we had experimented with live streaming our morning service into the Crèche room, using Facebook Live (with mixed results) and basic video editing using the built-in Windows 10 editor. We knew that more was possible, but even the little we had tried proved to be invaluable.

Through March 2020, the decisions we made were:

- To keep hosting a live gathering on Sunday mornings. In 2020, the first fully pre-recorded service on a Sunday morning was on December 27.
- To pick a platform and stick to it. In our context, it was Facebook, which our brilliant webmaster was able to stream to our website too.
- Not to emulate an on-site service online. Extended worship and long sermons are much less engaging from the sofa.
- To put a screen onscreen. The Clergy Support Trust had just bought my family a 49" TV which featured in every Church at Home service we ran. Watching TV on TV isn't a great experience, but it allowed us to play pre-recorded videos and show liturgy and prayers so people could join in at home. We still use a screen onscreen today.



Engaging the community at home

We value participation in our gatherings and community life, so we simplified Sundays, encouraging lots of activity in the comments. Things like saying hello and a 'Question of the Week' at the start of our gathering – sometimes serious, usually not – help develop habits of participation. This week's question of the week is 'Have you made any regrettable online purchases during lockdown?'. It's not unusual to have more than 100 comments during the 30-40 minutes of our online gathering.



Like many churches, we found new people joined us online who would never come in person. One teacher in our community comes from an unchurched family – his parents have never regularly attended church. Since Lockdown 1.0, they haven't missed a single week of Church Online with us.

Numbers peaked around Easter, then dropped as we got into the summer. But, by the autumn, we began to see a steady rise again, helped by the consistency that we had had since March.

Once we were allowed back into the church building, we transitioned to streaming through OBS. I'm fortunate to have capable individuals who spent a few weeks prepping and trialling how it would work.

At present, we use a camcorder as our main camera, with a smartphone as camera two. Audio comes through the church system, though we still find the music quality on Facebook much poorer than the visual quality. Pre-recorded content can be seamlessly inserted through OBS.

Current Church Online set-up with a special visitor (Zoom)

However, as 2020 went on, it became clear that our families were finding it a struggle for their children to join in. Zoom meetings for children and youth groups were fine, but joining in on Sundays was not.

So, in December, we hosted a [Zoom Nativity](#). This incorporated a live Zoom call for families into the normal Facebook broadcast. It was so much fun that we now have Church Online with Zoom for Families every month.

You can see the smartphone running Zoom below the screen.



Here's how we do it:

As well as the usual Facebook feed, we run a Zoom call from a laptop in the building (which is plugged into Facebook via [OBS](#)). A smartphone also on the Zoom call sits in front of the main Facebook camera (which you can see in the photo above). Those presenting wear two microphones: the usual headset mics for the church PA system (which goes into Facebook via OBS) and a Rode double lapel mic which goes into the smartphone on the Zoom call.

Presenters have two audiences: one on Facebook and the other on Zoom. Sometimes the Facebook audience watch a pre-recorded video,during which we chat to the families (usually telling jokes); at other times, the families are sent off to do a task that relates to the talk, while we speak to those on Facebook. It takes a bit of getting used to! But it’s been wonderful to help families participate more.

Hybrid church

As 2021 continues, we will be thinking about how to merge Church Online with on-site services. I was encouraged to hear someone say the other day, ‘No one has worked out how to do hybrid services yet.’ That encourages me to keep trying things and experimenting. Some of what we’ve learned during Lockdown – simpler gatherings, valuing participation as much as presentation, and the potential reach that Church Online has – will shape us for years to come.

Rev Richard England

Crofton Parish

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