

Like many, 2020 has been a journey of digital exploration, with highs and lows. Elliot Swatteridge, curate at at St Peter's and St James, Hereford, shares his insights from a year of experimenting with digital in his rural parish, the opportunities and challenges encountered, and a new-found love for filming.

It is much more straight forward than many people think

Videos can be very complex, but by no means do they have to be.

Just like anything else, you can do an amazing amount with something extremely simple. People have a hunger for authenticity, and simplicity is on your side for this. Sometimes people count themselves out and assume all this digital stuff is more for the younger generation, but this is a complete misconception. Videos can easily be just as intergenerational as any other expression of church. In fact, in our experience, the people who interact most with us most on Facebook are older members of our community.

I used to find filming very difficult - I didn't like to keep eye contact, and I couldn't get my words right. Now I have realised people don't always want polished speech - they want reality, authenticity; who you are. So video really is, truly, for everyone. I would go as far as saying it has the potential to be the most accessible form of the church we have available.

The online world is possibly our nation's richest unreached mission field

This is a big statement but I believe it is true.

The potential here is vast and was mostly unutilised before lockdown - then there was an unprecedented burst of churches running online provision, in uncharted waters of mission. We reached tens of thousands of people via social media who we probably would have never even seen otherwise. All this is, I believe, even more significant in a rural context. Video and social media put rural and urban on a level playing field - location no longer matters in the same way. You might be located many miles away from the nearest town, or in the bustling centre of London - online, everyone is in the same space. This is a really exciting new area of outreach for churches far from large urban areas that gives them real hope for growth into the future.

Videos have revolutionised our connection with our two church schools

We are connected to two wonderful church schools. Because of the lockdown, we now cannot go in person to lead collective worship. This could have meant a whole year of no more connection with this amazing community of children, teachers and families. And then the idea was suggested that we create video versions of collective worship videos. We now do these every week in term-time, and schools have been showing them enthusiastically. So each video is watched by hundreds of local children, together with teachers. The teachers have told us that the children in the school even cheer when the videos come on!

I am quite overwhelmed by this, to be honest, by how much opportunity is here. But I thank God that He can use even our deeply imperfect videos for His massive glory. Think about it: how much would we give to have hundreds of children in our rural churches? And this is exactly what we have in our local primary schools. I don't come from a Christian family myself, but my C of E primary school I remember had a foundational role in bringing me to come to know Jesus. My C of E school gave me a gift of unspeakable value in this.

Zoom can transform the accessibility and consistency of prayer meetings

Another wonderful story of digital media is the potential for prayer meetings on Zoom. And we have found that Zoom enables this coming together in a big way - especially in rural locations where people may not be able to easily come in together to meet in the evenings. We run Zoom prayer meetings for revival each Monday night and have many more than would have been able to in person. This enables prayer meetings to be far more accessible, again particularly to older members of our community. And it enables them to be more consistent - as people can often commit to Zoom prayer meetings every week in a way they cannot in person. So for our rural settings, I believe Zoom helps us step up the level of prayer.

Despondency comes in regular waves but prayer is essential to sustain

One final point, and this is probably the most important.

I have found that producing lots of content online can make your mood like a rollercoaster. One hour you feel ecstatic and inspired, the next despondency comes. To be honest, I have often felt almost a sense of despair of, "What on earth am I going to put in this video?" Yet God has driven me to pray in this season of despondency, more than ever. And I have discovered depths of riches in communion with Jesus Christ this year more than I have ever known as a result.

Creativity comes out of communion. I have loved the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. So I would urge anyone reading this who feels dry - discover the riches of the secret place of prayer with the Lord. After all, all this is meaningless without God working through it. Unless the Lord builds the house, the builder's labour in vain. (Psalm 127:1) Unless the Lord works through the video, the editors create in vain.

Online mission, like any pioneering mission, can be very costly to do. But it's worth it. All the people who can be reached are all worth it. And God promises to be our bread of life, sustaining us, promising to make His home in us by His Holy Spirit. He gives us the strength and more than enough for this wonderful mission field.

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