

What just happened to the churches?

Before COVID-19 very few churches had an online presence. But immediately our buildings were closed, huge numbers of churches learnt how to offer online services. Estimates vary greatly but one survey of 200 churches around the country found average attendance 50% up, though with massive variations between individual churches. One population survey found that one in four of the UK population had accessed online worship in Spring-Summer 2020, and half of people aged 18-34 were engaging in online faith-related activity, including prayer ([visit the Centre for Digital Theology website](#) for more on this).

Many people discovered online church had some advantages - giving them freedom and control, choosing their own time to access services, picking which church to attend, pausing, fast-forwarding or repeating at will. Standards rose as new skills were developed and new tech bought. Some churches started getting to know their new online members, even doing online nurture courses. As lockdown continued online worship began to feel almost normal and many churches decided to remain online permanently even when the pandemic was past.

As the lifting of restrictions approached, the main question changed from 'How do we get through the next few weeks?' to 'What should our church and its services look like long term?'

Think and discuss

- What has our church's experience of the COVID-19 rollercoaster been like?
- How far along the long-term planning process have we got?

How different will church and the wider world be?

A decade's social change has been compressed into a year. Shopping habits, leisure pursuits, working practices and housing preferences have all moved on, perhaps permanently. Screen use will probably not revert to pre-pandemic levels. More people will be working from home, and some meetings will never revert from Zoom to room. People have also changed inside. Some may still fear crowded rooms and churches, while others are desperate for close community. New poverty, unemployment and social problems may remain for years to come.

Church communities have also changed, some members dropping off the online radar and others spending their lives on it. Old habits have been lost and new sources of spiritual food have been found, for example, the huge rise in numbers attending daily Morning Prayer. Some are rested, some exhausted. Old members may have drifted, new people have arrived online. Churches are re-thinking their patterns and programmes, for there is no need to return to the ways and problems of the past.

Think and discuss

- How has our church community changed since lockdown began?
- What are the implications of these changes for the future?

Do we have a new opportunity?

The Roman road arrived to enable the spread of the Gospel in the time of the apostles. Digital technology arrived in time to enable churches across the world to function and grow when the buildings were closed.

Jesus' last command to his disciples was to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth. In practice, most of them stayed in their Jerusalem comfort zone until forced out by persecution. Similarly, the Church of today has been forced out of its comfort zone by the pandemic.

The God of mission has a heart for the whole of humanity. The new technology enables churches to fulfil their mission to reach almost everyone in every corner and end of the earth. It is said that mission is finding out what God is doing and joining in. Perhaps the sending of the Church out into the online world is one of the things God is doing to bring some good out of the experience of the pandemic.

Think and discuss

- What do you think God is saying to the church where you are?
- Where do you see evidence of God at work at the moment?

Browse chapters

Back to the start

[Guide to online and onsite services](#)

Next

Online mission and evangelism

Back to start

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