



## Online as part of a wider strategy

Online strategy can be part of an overall plan, not another isolated bright idea. Don't simply plan online services – plan worship patterns and provision as a whole.

As well as going online, many churches have used phone options and service order deliveries to enable worship participation and keep in touch.

We are aware of the need to seek out those with whom the church lost contact during the pandemic. And the pastoral needs of the faithful core should not be overlooked. Many churches have also discovered outdoor worship. For example, Messy Church is now developing 'Messy goes wild', exploring nature and environmental issues.

Online growth has been just as great in small churches with basic equipment as in large churches with slick offerings. People value the very local and familiar. There is a tension between pouring resources into one quality offering and spreading resources to stream lots of very local services.

Encouraging online giving needs to be part of the overall strategy to recover financially from covid, but also to develop the discipleship of online members and to acknowledge their full belonging to the body of Christ. (See [Building a generous church](#) for more on this).

## Think and discuss

- What sort of overall plan does your online strategy fit into?
- Is it better to combine or to spread the effort?

## Reasons for choosing online

People will choose online participation because they find it easier, less stressful and more flexible, for example:

- Housebound or unwell
- Disabilities that make attending in person difficult
- Carers with responsibilities for others
- Anxious about close contact post-pandemic
- New to church or faith, desiring anonymity
- Families with commitments to children's activities on Sunday

Some established churchgoers will stay online for these reasons, but there will be many new people for whom online church is more accessible than in-building.

If new people have joined during lockdown, you can ask them why and what they prefer to do when the building option is fully open to them.

Then adapt the style and content of online provision to meet the needs you discern locally.

## Think and discuss

- What motivations for attending church online do you discern locally?
- Will having an online option tempt people away from the building? Does that matter?

# Which group are you trying to reach?

Real human beings don't fall neatly into categories, but these may help clarify your thinking:

## Unchurched (never been churchgoers before)

Are they a similar culture and age group to the present congregation, or families looking for something wholesome to do together, or younger generations with a different culture?

Many Christians come to faith as children or teens. Families and young people are the most responsive group to church and gospel today, (witness the rise of Messy Church). Many churches will see online as a new way of reaching families. Population surveys suggest young adults were the most responsive to online church in the initial lockdown, so it is important that some churches focus on them.

## De-churched (used to come and may return)

Was there an upset, did they fail to make friends or last came as children? How can you make it better, permanent, for them this time?

## Half-churched (don't come every Sunday)

Up to half of the average attendance decline in recent decades has been less frequent attendance rather than fewer people involved. By 2019 the average Anglican was attending little more than one week in two. With an online option people can catch up on YouTube or Facebook and attendance frequency can climb again.

## Re-churched (dropped away but now re-connect)

The elderly or frail who would come to the building if they could, can now access the service and stay part of the community. The housebound should not just be thought of as recipients of ministry. Online, their experience, wisdom and gifts can be tapped for the benefit of the whole church.

## Think and discuss

- What groups are you aiming at?
- How will that affect service content and style?

# What sort of online will you choose?

## Simple livestream

A static camera or two simply film the leaders while the service proceeds as normal. Online participants are simply observers and may find it dull.

## Online hybrid

Plan what will be attractive online (40 minutes, arresting start, fast-paced, visually interesting, use several clips and cameras, online pastor welcoming people on their laptop, vertical focus, post service zoom chat). See Chapter 6 for good practice. Then open up this service for people to attend in-building as well.

## Fully hybrid

Treat in-person and online attenders equally (60 minutes, tighten up the flow, online pastors, screen in church, online members lead prayers, read lessons, preach etc, hybrid post-service refreshments and weekday programme). Keep enough elements live in the building to make it a live event for those who attend in-building.

## Online congregation

Add an online-only service to grow a new congregation. This simplifies and gives one clear focus to each service, but is more work and separates the two groups rather than integrating them.

## Online church

]Plant a new stand-alone online-only church to serve a wider area or particular demographic. This can be done in conjunction with other local churches.

## Daily Office

The biggest percentage growth in online church attendance has probably been at daily Morning Prayer and Compline. Clergy who used to say the office with two people in church at 8am now lead fifty others over their breakfast tables. This extraordinary revival of an ancient spiritual discipline seems to feed both experienced and new churchgoers alike. In fact, online enables all manner of short-format worship, prayer or other church events.

## Think and discuss

- How do you see the merits of the different options?
- What should your church be attempting?

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