

Family sitting on sofas watching laptop

One key question that churches running services online will want to think through is whether online worship really is 'church'. That will shape whether we are content for people to remain online participants indefinitely, or see this as a stepping-stone to 'proper' church. This will then shape our strategic and resourcing decisions. So, is church online really and fully church?

This gets us into a branch of theology called 'ecclesiology', the study of the Church. As with many things, there is a breadth of understanding within Anglicanism, different traditions emphasising various aspects of the purpose, identity and function of the Church.

The word 'ecclesiology' derives from the Greek term 'ecclesia', meaning 'assembly' or 'gathering'. It referred to the assembly of citizens in the democratic city-states of Ancient Greece. When early Christians used 'ecclesia' to describe the Church they were emphasising that they all gathered together - every member being important regardless of wealth, social status or educational background.

From what we know of early church life there were at least three main purposes of the 'ecclesia', and these have continued in different ways throughout church history.

First, they were gatherings for worship. [The Church of England website](#) says this:

"As Christians we believe the full purpose of our lives is to praise God."

It continues with this quote from Archbishop William Temple:

"The fundamental business of life is worship.... All life ought to be worship; and we know quite well there is no chance it will be worship unless we have times when we have worship and nothing else."

So worship is fundamental to the life of the Church. In our diverse traditions, this looks quite different, with varying degrees of formality or tradition on offer, emphasising sung worship, or the reading and preaching of Scripture, or the celebration of the sacraments. Before lockdown, the Eucharist had become the central service in many Anglican parishes, but this has not always been the case, and it is not the case everywhere today. For example, there are still members of cathedral congregations who regularly attend Evensong, not the Eucharist. Many family-style services such as Messy Church have communion infrequently.

Can worship take place online? Clearly, it is possible to sing and pray online. It is harder to join with the Eucharist, although while unable to receive Communion in our buildings, we have been encouraged to join with 'spiritual communion' ([Guidance on Spiritual Communion and Coronavirus](#)) nurtured, through contemplation, by Jesus the Bread of Life. This will remain possible for those who by choice or circumstance remain online worshippers. Perhaps for some a pattern could arise of regular spiritual communion online combined with less frequent physical reception of the sacrament in church, home or hospital. And baptisms will still require a physical gathering!

The second main purpose of the 'ecclesia' was teaching. Many New Testament letters would have been written to be read out at a meeting of the local church. These contain a mixture of evangelisation, exhortation, and instruction in discipleship. The teaching ministry of the Church continues to include all of these. The visibility of a pulpit in the architecture of many churches reminds us of the importance of this teaching ministry.

This purpose is perhaps the easiest one to deliver online, although good online preachers recognise they need to be briefer and strike a slightly different tone. Long and shouty sermons don't come over well online! One of the great blessings of online church is how it makes the teaching and evangelistic ministry of the church accessible to many more people, including some who would not normally attend 'in person' church or call themselves Christians.

The third main purpose of the 'ecclesia' was fellowship or community. The local church gathered together people from every strata of society, and in many places this still happens in a way which is both appealing and counter-cultural. Can this be replicated online?

For those who did not grow up in a digital world, the answer may be no. But for younger people, this is not necessarily the case. People born since the 1990s often make no distinction between friends they meet physically and those with whom they associate online only. For some, their primary experience of community is found online.

Churches wishing to develop community online will need to be intentional, using advice provided in other sections of this guidance. But it can be done.

It is also worth remembering that the earliest Christian communities were probably house churches, extended families and households discovering what it meant to be disciples of Christ in their daily lives, coming together in larger gatherings from time to time. Perhaps we are rediscovering something of that model.

To conclude, the 'ecclesia' is the whole gathering of the people of God in a place, drawn together around worship, teaching, and fellowship. Once provision is made for occasional meeting for the sacraments, all of these can be creatively expressed through church online.

Think and discuss

- Is online a full expression of worship or a staging post to joining in person?
- How can you mitigate the problem with online sacraments?

Browse chapters

Previous

Online strategy

Next

Digital communications

Back to start

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