When people produce TV programmes or live events they plan the content and the technical aspects carefully beforehand. It is worth doing the same with your online church services, whether they are recorded or livestreamed.

A well planned service will:

- help everyone involved to know what is happening,

- make it clear who is responsible for each element,

- flag up potential problems or areas for improvement,

- make it less stressful, and

- create a more engaging and creative service for people watching online and any in the building

Making a planning grid

It is worth writing a plan even if you are livestreaming a traditional service where the liturgy and structure follow a set pattern. This will help you to make it visually interesting and enable those watching online to enter into the worship.

1. Start by creating a simple planning grid like this one

2. Add in a rough order of service

3. Now add in details like the names of the songs, the Bible reading, the theme of the sermon and the content of the notices

4. Now add in the name of the person doing each bit

5. Now add in technical info - for example are the songs on video or live? Where will the preacher be standing for the sermon? Are you using any PowerPoint slides or graphics if using a platform like OBS or Switcher Studio?

6. If you have more than one camera source you can add in which one you will be live on in each bit of the service

7. If you are planning a Zoom service you might like to add in details like who will need spotlighting and when.

Now you have a useful technical running order which everyone involved in the online service can work from! It is worth looking through it to check the service flows well and won't be too long for an online congregation. It is well worth doing a technical 'walk-through' of a service beforehand if you can. This is especially important for big calendar services like Christmas, Easter and Harvest where you might have lots of different elements and be hoping lots of people will join in online. It is like having a technical rehearsal for a play and it can make all the difference!

Troubleshooting

However well you plan, things will go wrong sometimes. The important thing is not to panic and to know that it has happened to everyone at some point! The value of having a service planning grid and doing a technical run-through before the service means that it will be easier to come up with a plan B and to feel calmer about what you are doing. Also, you are unlikely to make the same technical mistake twice, so every blooper is a learning opportunity.

Planning visually interesting services

Television, films and online services are a visual medium. What you are seeing is as important, if not more, than what you are hearing.

We are used to seeing lots of variety when we watch a TV programme. A single static shot of a church service might do the job but long-term it doesn't engage those watching online and means they have to work harder to stay focused.

In a TV news report, each shot will last between about four and six seconds. A TV news studio would show about three different camera shots, one on the presenter, one on a guest and a wide shot to show the wider studio. The director will 'follow the action' by cutting between the shots as appropriate.

There is a phrase in TV production, "Show don't tell". Think about how you could visually bring to life the theme of the service you are planning. It can often lead to a more creative service all round.

Example:

Imagine you are planning a family service and the reading is the Feeding of the 5000 (Matthew 14:13-21). You could visually bring it to life in various ways:

- Create a picnic scene at the front of the church. The service leader could be sitting on the picnic rug at the start of the service to introduce the theme.

- Video someone doing the reading outside on a hill or use power point images/graphic slides to bring the story to life in church and online.

- Film a video in your community asking a number of people what they like to have in their packed lunch.

- Interview someone in the service who has been to lots of big festivals about what it is like to be at a big event - the crowds, the catering etc.

- Film a packed-lunch challenge in church – set out sandwich ingredients, blindfold two contestants and see who can make the best sandwich in a minute!

These are ideas but hopefully you get the picture. It is well worth having a visual brainstorming session when you plan the service.

Live stream services and life events

One of the tragedies of the pandemic has been the way in which we have been unable to attend funerals or hold weddings or baptisms as we would have planned. More positively, the development of livestreaming has made it possible for some people to attend online who might not have been able to get to a service in a church building. It is worth paying particular attention to the challenges and opportunities generated by these services, enabling as much participation as possible among people who might not be regular churchgoers. Canon Sandra Millar, Head of Welcome and Life Events for the CofE, has written about this with regard to funerals here: At last, I will be able to help bereaved people say a proper farewell at funerals | Sandra Millar | The Guardian

This blog is part of the Step-by-step guide to online and onsite services

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