

Online worship in the rural parish of Ainsty, west of York, has deepened prayer life in the community and led to an increase in the numbers of people attending church services in person since restrictions were eased.



The parish, spread over 20 miles, now runs 'hybrid' worship both online and in person, based in one of its five churches every week, along with morning and evening prayer by Zoom.

Up to 700 people are prayed for by name throughout the week. The parish also runs 24-hour prayer on Zoom, often leading up to Sunday worship. The online prayer and Sunday worship began during the first lockdown last year.

Revd Richard Battersby, who has headed the parish for the past five years as part of a 'Bishop's Mission Order', said the parish was growing before the pandemic but the decision to livestream services has increased participation, making it easier for people to join who might previously have had to travel to services.

Around 20 people tune in to morning and evening prayer regularly, he said, while the parish now has a worshipping community of more than 200 members, compared to around 150 before the pandemic.

"At the morning and evening prayer the level and depth of spiritual encounter has been very profound," he said. "There is a real, tangible sense of God's presence."

He added: "People have been joining us for Sunday worship who live outside the parish – such as couples who married in the parish but are now living in places such as Manchester and family groups that were separated but joined together for worship. We have had one person read prayers from Ghana, where they were working."

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