

Members of a new “cathedral” of online worshippers formed since the first lockdown are to play a key role in the Church of England’s 100th national online service to be broadcast this weekend.

Five faces are shown in portrait with the words 100th online service: a service of the Word for the Baptism of Christ written above their faces

Prayers will be read by people who joined a regular digital worshipping community that grew through YouTube and Facebook broadcasts of national online services.

The first national online service was broadcast from the crypt chapel at Lambeth Palace on Mothering Sunday 2020 as the nation went into lockdown. Since then a service has been broadcast every Sunday – with additional services broadcast over Easter, Advent and Christmas.

The broadcast on Sunday, marking the milestone of the 100th service, will led by the Vicar of St Martin-in-the-Fields Dr Sam Wells, with a sermon from Revd Dr Isabelle Hamley, who oversees the Church of England’s national online services.

Dr Hamley, who took part in the first online service broadcast in March 2020 from the Crypt chapel of Lambeth Palace, will pay tribute to the work of both the national and local churches in providing online services during the pandemic.

She describes the “bittersweet” milestone of the 100th service after the “grief, pain and anxiety” suffered because of the pandemic. The success of the online broadcasts has highlighted the number of people who were previously excluded from in-person worship, she will say.

“We now know there is a regular worshipping community online, alongside many others, who meet as a community and pray for each other,” she said.

“This is something that is new and has taken us by surprise

“This was never something we set out to do but a truly diverse and international community has formed in the comment section while watching the services.

“It’s a bit like an online cathedral - we have a solid core of worshippers and lots of visitors who stream a service occasionally.”

Headshot of Rev Dr Sam Wells

Those saying prayers in the service include Chris Atkinson-Price, based in Bavaria, who was confirmed in 2012 in Bingley, Yorkshire, but went to Lutheran services near her rural home in Germany.

The first lockdown prompted her to search for online services in English.

She said: “There were two things I liked – one was the services themselves and the other was the community chat that went along with it. I’ve met new people and we’ve become friends.

“I’ve got one new friend based in Japan and another in India and we’re talking all the time on Facebook Messenger now. We support each other and we’ve set up a Bible reading group – we’ve got a reading plan which we discuss each day.”

Natalie Rispin, a financial administrator, from Baldock, Herts, and a member of the online worshipping community, also says a prayer during the service.

“The online service is a fantastic resource, it brings together people from all over the world. Before the service, there is a live chat page that is opened and everyone goes in there early and checks up on each other, making sure that each other is okay. It’s a really lovely group of people.

“When the service is on, people sometimes type ‘Amen’ or ‘Thanks be to God’; so we feel like we are worshipping together. A Facebook group has been formed when we discuss the service afterwards.”

At the start of the service, Dr Sam Wells will say: “As God is with us in Christ and the Holy Spirit, so we are glad to be with God and one another through the gift of the internet.

“With the imagination and creativity of God’s people and the power of the Holy Spirit, these 22 months since church buildings closed their doors have seen ways of worshipping, we’d never thought possible springing up.

“Today we mark not just the Church of England’s own online service but those of many churches large and small throughout the country.”

The Church of England website has [received more than 92,000 page views](#) for its blogs to help church leaders with live streaming and online services since these were launched in March 2020. Half of the 20 most read blogs on the website are on livestreaming and video skills.

The Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell, said: “In the last (nearly) two years we have seen a kind of digital coming of age.

“The national online services from the Church of England have enabled many people to be part of a worshipping community during this most difficult and potentially isolating of times.

“There is a real place for these online communities and we recognise online worship is here to stay, not as a replacement for worshipping in person, but as a way of worshipping and building community in innovative and accessible ways.

“The national services have been a great team effort. Services have been put together each week.

“I am very thankful to all those whose creativity, faithfulness and commitment have been a part of making it happen.”

More information:

- The 100 national online services have been seen 16.5 million times with a growing proportion of [Facebook viewers](#) from younger age groups. The percentage of Facebook viewers aged 25-54 increased by 10% between 2020 and 2021.

- Meanwhile parishes and churches have also provided services and events online with more than 17,000 livestreamed services added to [A Church Near You](#), the church finding tool.
 - More than 1650 church leaders have attended [online training to learn how to provide online worship](#) since the start of the pandemic.
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