



Research Briefing Paper

Full report: ["The Reformation of the 21st Century?" Church of England clergy Experiences of Ministry during the Covid-19 Pandemic](#)

The future of digital technologies within the Church: Lessons from the Covid-19 Pandemic

While the observations presented here were collected during the Covid-19 pandemic, they provide an opportunity to reflect on lessons learnt for continuing and future incorporation of digital technologies within ministry and the wider Church.

Key Observations

- Many clergy were digital novices at the start of the pandemic, with limited or no experience of social media or digital technologies. There was a reliance on experts within own congregations, families and WhatsApp groups of colleagues for digital knowledge and skills. There were clear inequities of resourcing in this regard.
- However, clergy also learnt valuable new skills and had the opportunity to observe other clergy practices on-line. This could be disheartening if more sophisticated but also an important source of insight and innovation.
- Many clergy felt overloaded, exhausted from holding others' grief and from constant digital innovation and inability to take time away, however there was also a renewed sense of calling for some clergy as a "21st Century pastor".
- New forms of pastoral care included upskilling parishioners to enable them to use digital devices and access online church offerings.
- The pandemic was a period of reflection for clergy, an opportunity to think through what really matters in terms of ministry and where digital helped or hindered.

Challenges

- Less well-resourced parishes over-relied on a small number of people for digital support and troubleshooting. Such parishes made infrastructure choices that were affordable and achievable to enable online delivery in the pandemic, but which cannot sustain longer term digital engagement.
- Clergy want to consolidate and develop their hard-won digital skills acquired over the pandemic but need top-up and more specialist training.
- Digital ministry necessitates a new range of practices for clergy without removing previous required practices leading to issues around sustainability of work.
- Some parishes faced resistance to digital innovation and may not have adequate support for such development.
- Congregation expectations around the quality of digital output and delivery are now higher than the more forgiving attitude witnessed early in the pandemic.

- The pandemic did not clearly create a new 'online' congregation and there is a tension between maintaining a feeling of local community and attracting a wider (virtual) congregation.

Opportunities

- The pandemic was an opportunity for 'experimentation' in the provision of ministry while congregations were already disrupted. Close working with members of congregations during the pandemic fostered a re-orientation to importance of community. There is an opportunity to maintain that momentum through shared learning around the future role of digital technologies in ministry.
- Coordinated working across churches in a parish or benefice enabled more efficient delivery of services and support for clergy and parishioner wellbeing. This may be a more sustainable model of the digitalisation of ministry for the future.
- Some aspects of ministry worked well online, for example PCC meetings on Zoom, which have the benefit of saving time, fuel and money. Online services also enabled wider participation within the parish, for example, those previously excluded due to access issues through disability or time constraints.
- Hybrid church is expected to be the future post-pandemic, but this needs resourcing (funding, infrastructure and staff) across parishes on a more equal basis than currently. Advice is required on what works well online and what is best in church.

Suggestions for Good Practice

For clergy and parishes:

- Explore sources of funding for digital resources and to support a sustainable digital infrastructure.
- Develop clear roles, strategy and boundaries around use of social media for clergy teams.
- Seek examples of good sustainable practice around the use of digital technologies in ministry and consider what would work best for you and your parish.

For the diocese, and drawing on shared learning from parishes and benefices:

- Develop strategic direction for digitalisation.
- Adopt an equitable approach to resourcing digital implementation and innovation.
- Capitalise on the utility of digital tools for communication and inclusion, including making better use of the knowledge and expertise of previously marginalised groups.
- Provide guidance on what hybrid church may look like.

For the Ministry Development Team:

- Facilitate the sharing of existing digital skills, consolidating digital learning and integrating digital skills training into ordinands' curriculum.
- Formulate what constitutes a sustainable pattern of working, that includes digital work.