Being digital and being church?

The purpose of this paper is to take a practical look at our churches' journeys with "digital church[1]", and to encourage a more intentional strategy around how we use digital resources alongside more conventional means.

As we grapple with what, how and if a church should "go digital", it's important to recognise that for many of us this journey has already begun. Due to the global pandemic many congregations have toed the digital waters and have either explored the shallow end, dived right in or from the outset decided that they aren't naturally "digital swimmers". From the beginning we should acknowledge these initial feelings and the reason we might have these.

When we were thrown into lockdown, some congregations soon went digital (on Zoom, Teams or broadcast on YouTube), others tried a mixed economy approach (using a mixture of digital and physical resources) and still others opted solely for physical resources (print outs, letters, at-home kits). Depending on how this was first explored, initial steps may have affected our overall opinion on how our churches approach the digital. In the District survey (Autumn 2022), 12 of 13 circuits responded and shared that all of them had explored some sort of online expression of church over Covid (fig.1).

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[1] Whilst 'digital church' can cover many aspects, I initially want to focus on live streaming and zoom led expressions of church before broadening this to include social media and WhatsApp uses.

Part 1. Survey of Church Services broadcasted online   1. a) how many, if any, of the churches in your circuit have had, or continue to have, either str... or hybrid* services? (Either live or pre-recorded)
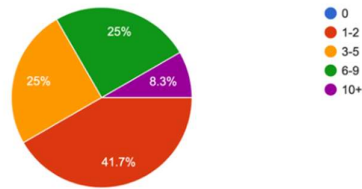12 responses

Figure 1. Circuits that have, or continue to stream services online.

All of those 12 circuits now have some experience of streaming church services, and while many congregations have reverted to "physical church", or at least scaled down their digital expression of church, figure 2 shows that each circuit is continuing with some form of online expression.

1.d) How many of these streamed or hybrid services are still going?
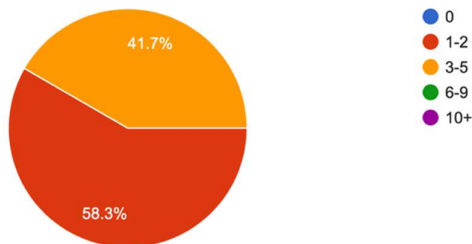12 responses

Figure 2. Ongoing streamed services

During the UK lockdowns and ongoing presence of Covid, the online broadcasts were essential for many. Once churches reopened for physical congregations, in many or most cases the priority shifted back into physical aspects of church rather than digital. In my own circuit context, the tech savvy instigators and operators were tired from hosting, or their pre-covid duties became the priority once more. Some continued to maintain both. Others decided that digital was for a season.

There is a danger that though many attendees could physically return to the church building, that simply isn't the case for those continuing to self-isolate or for those who are no longer able to attend physical church. Where the

provision of online church has now been removed, attending church becomes then a privilege of the physically able, so it's good that each circuit is providing at least one form of digital church for those who struggle to make it to physical buildings.

As we reflect on the privilege of the physically able, we should also acknowledge that going digital requires it's own privileges: affordability of technology, access to the internet and the "knowhow" to access digital provisions. We need to consider all of these factors when assessing the usefulness of "going digital", not just as regards our congregations but our local communities too.

Recognising then where many of our churches started with online expressions of churches, there is a question of resources: other than human resources, how much money was spent on equipment enabling services to be streamed? What kit did we fall into using during the pandemic; is this still the kit we are using today or have we as churches/circuits invested in more appropriate kit?

The First challenge to circuits and churches is to ask whether they have invested in going digital.

We mostly began within limited means during a global pandemic. It's important to remember that we don't have to continue the way we started; we don't have to just do one format or the other. For some, having a mixed economy of church may be a way forward, as we are seeing throughout wider society. While the pandemic was obviously a devasting period of modern life and many have lost loved ones or become long-term ill because of it, the events of lockdown and self-isolation have undoubtedly been a catalyst for our wider society to engage with technology differently. Zoom

meetings have now been firmly established as plausible ways to gather; having large meetings and events streamed is also becoming more commonplace. Although churches may have reverted to physical only, wider society has embraced this mixed economy in its own way. I hope we can see that this isn't "either/or", but "both/and"; it's up to us as congregations, churches and circuits how mixed our economy is: how much or how little do we stream? How many of our meetings are Zoom based, hybrid, or solely physical? And once we have decided on the right balance, how are we communicating our digital provisions beyond our buildings? A Newsletter? Email? Social Media? A physical letter?

The second challenge is: Have we as a church (or as circuits) formally talked about the format of meetings? Some meetings may benefit from the advantages of meeting in person (for the physical fellowship, informal 1:1 conversations and reading body language), but it may also be considered that for certain times of the year (such as winter) it makes sense to meet over Zoom instead. To prevent needing to travel during treacherous weather conditions or to unnecessarily heat up cold buildings causing concern for our treasurers and those seeking eco-church improvements, some meetings may be better off being on Zoom or Teams instead (this again requires folks to have the right technology and internet available at home).

Another consideration while discussing meeting formats is about who is your target audience. For example, if you have volunteers who are confined to home (whether due to family commitments, physical limitations etc) then an online meeting may enable them to take up responsibilities rather than just send their apologies. Intentional conversations on these topics may lead to exploring how technology can be best used to help facilitate our church practices and fellowship.

Other examples of intentional conversations around harnessing technology for church may be to have a WhatsApp group during Lent, where instead of expecting people to attend a physical place at one time in the week, people can engage with a subject or chapter of a book in their own time around their existing commitments. Please be aware of GDPR and getting permission from users who are happy to share their mobile numbers, or to agree acceptable message hours, or to agree that notifications will be turned off, to enable those who are more likely to engage at more antisocial hours can do so without fear of judgement. These expectations are best addressed before the official start.

Jesus and the iPhone[2]

Whilst the Minister within me would be tempted to ground our conversation thus far with bible study of how Jesus would embrace the internet, we are simply unable to transpose our modern interpretation of technology into 1st century Jerusalem! The way that Jesus' ministry was recorded was simply the accepted way wider society retained and shared information back then: largely through auditory means, the only important information was held on manuscripts and reserved for those who could read and write. However, within the first century the early believers commit to writing accounts and sharing letters about their faith which eventually becomes our New Testament. Though it may be a crude example, we have to give the early church credit for its embracing of their surrounding technology in communicating the gospel message not only to their immediate readers but to subsequent generations all the way to the Guttenberg press and eventually to us, and to digital and physical means of carrying the message of the gospel to our current congregations and surrounding society.

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[2] Other smart phones are available.

However, as my Granddad (A local preacher for 76 years) would say, "just having a Bible on a shelf won't change your life, it's what you do with it that counts". Why then should we limit the gift of the good news to written form when other means of communication are available to us?

To draw upon an illustration by the Revd Graham Thompson[3], Graham speaks of the golden days of Methodism where the shop front of our churches was our Sunday morning service, whereas now with the development of social media, one would argue that we now have the ability to offer our first impressions of our churches before they (seekers/ newcomers/ passers by) has ever set foot on our street, let alone in our physical buildings. If we choose it, our shop front can be accessible on any smart phone or smart device. So, wouldn't we want to take our digital presence seriously? Instead of accidentally falling into it, we should set out ideas, strategies and reflect on how we can be intentionally digital.

An intentional digital journey

What follows are some questions to help us consider how we can shape our digital expression of church (whether on websites, social media pages or on YouTube Channels). Please note whilst these are orientated primarily for digital, these can also be applied to wider churches more generally, as they can not only inform our digital presence, but our physical identity as church too.

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[3] Methodist President of Conference 2022-23, speaking at the Yorkshire West District Development Day, Pontefract Methodist Church 15th Oct 2022

Reflecting your congregation:

What values best sum up your present congregation? (this is not the time to share your aspirations, but a space to reflect on who you are as a congregation).

- How do you best live out your faith as a church?
- Could you write a sentence or a tag line, that best describes you? (accessibility, love, worship, fellowship, community, eco-aware)
- What is the journey that your church has already been on? Are there key values that have always grounded your church?
- What interesting events has your church lived through?

Reflecting your surroundings communities:

- What does your local community look like?
- What are the regular community events?
- What does your digital community look like? (do surrounding groups, communities use one form of social media over others?)
- Are there annual physical/ digital events that your church could get involved?

What elements of your church life are already online?

- Do you have a church website?
- Do you regularly do things over zoom?
- Do you already have a social media presence? (for example: a Facebook page or twitter account)
- What do you have energy and resources for?
- How are physical/digital resources/events advertised? Internally on notice sheets or externally on posters or online?

A word on stewarding and accountability

Ultimately, having an online presence requires two or more people to be involved and therefore you need to consider energy and ability levels of the volunteers or members of staff that you are hoping to get involved. It's important to communicate with one another and to have an agreed plan to answer questions (such as having to hand booking information). When administrating a Facebook group for example, remember that your volunteers may be doing this in a volunteer capacity, but those online visitors see it as an official church account and so our volunteers should behave in a fitting manner. Just as in physical buildings, safeguarding is a priority, perhaps even more so as we learn to navigate these spaces as church.

It's also important when embarking on increasing digital presence for your church that it is an active presence, that your digital stewards respond to information requests within an agreed timeframe, and that the information shared is professional and is kept up-to-date. Whilst there may be certain volunteers at the start you will need to consider succession planning- that when a volunteer or staff member moves on that their administrator privileges are removed, and a replacement is found.

Some final words

It's important to talk about church strategy, and whilst that might sound daunting, to put it simply: it's about having an intentional conversation about how your church (or circuit) approaches 'digital church'. Having this intentional conversation may mean one or more churches invest (both in finance and time) in providing a more digital expression of church, or it may mean that the circuit collectively takes this responsibility (streaming circuit services, administrating a circuit Facebook page). As long as churches are having a conversation about how they can collectively embrace 'digital church' it is a good thing. Digital isn't the answer to everything but it is

however an important tool to enable those who struggle to engage with fellowship, worship, witness and discipleship beyond the physical church walls at a set traditional time.

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Further reading:

Dave Adamson

Adamson, Dave. *MetaChurch: How to Use Digital Ministry to Reach People and Make Disciples* (reThink Group. 2022)

Methodist Church. *Social media guidelines*, https://shorturl.at/acijl (13/08/23)

Methodist Church. *Children and Youth media and communications guidance for churches,* https://shorturl.at/fqul3 (13/08/23)