

'AS WE ARE GATHERED' AT BLACKSHAW HEAD



- an 'online spiritual gathering place for scattered souls'

This is the story of how a remote village church, based in a little hilltop Methodist chapel, became an international worship broadcaster!

When the small church at Blackshaw Head, high in the Pennines at the western edge of West Yorkshire, was forced to close its doors in March 2020 due to the pandemic lockdown, the leaders decided that they would ensure that all the members still had access to weekly worship and fellowship.

We began with a weekly written act of worship, emailed to those who were online and posted out to the rest, along with a little newsletter, but this soon became a recorded video act of worship. We posted this on our facebook page every Sunday morning, scheduled for our usual church start time. Some folk watched it live, others on 'catch-up' either later on Sunday or during the week. After the live broadcast each Sunday morning we opened our 'zoom coffee lounge' to sit down together in our respective homes over coffee for a chat, as we were used to doing after worshipping together.

We also produced DVDs of each week's video to take round in advance to those members of our congregation not on the internet (along with a weekly cooked meal for some of the more vulnerable), so that they could watch with us.

At its peak we were getting several hundred hundred joining online with us each week, (we think the maximum was 883 'visits'), including check-ins from as far afield as India and Australia, though as places of worship reopened this naturally fell away to a point where we had a regular weekly online scattered congregation of around 50, in addition to those who gathered in our chapel.

It was an inspiring, though demanding, journey, for the most part involving only ourselves, (we have an in-house local preacher) though from time to time we welcomed other circuit preachers. Along the way we depended on the massive input of our young adult members, sent home from uni, or in lock-down from work. They are a group of gifted musicians, as well as having the technical 'know-how' to make it all possible.

When we were able to re-open our building, and meet on Sunday mornings, we faced a dilemma. We felt that we could not sustain both recorded and live worship each week. But we were reluctant to abandon this new ministry, and those who had depended on us for so long.

We knew that some who regularly worshipped on-line with us were not 'church-goers'. In fact we were asked for an assurance from one of them that we would continue our online worship videos when we had fully returned into our chapel. Another told us that, although work commitments meant she could never join us on Sunday mornings, she always set aside an hour on Sunday evenings to sit down to worship with us.

We had also built up quite a resource - our little worship group had recorded over 150 hymn and song videos, - and it seemed a shame to simply delete them.

We recognised that we needed to prayerfully discern where God was leading us. And God led us to a very simple conclusion - that, despite our doubts, we could sustain both, if we went about it the right way and were open to a wider vision.

So, what throughout lockdown was a full video version of morning worship going out at 10.30 on Sundays, followed by a 'zoom coffee lounge' online get-together for conversation, has evolved, since we returned to full live worship, into 'As We Are Gathered' ('AsWAG').

This is a simpler, more informal and magazine-type half-hour worship video each week, which we describe as *'an online spiritual gathering place for scattered souls'*.

We use the technical skills ('gifts') we developed ('God gave us') during lockdown to record the 'variable' parts each week - one or two of the set lectionary readings, a short reflective chat, and relevant and topical prayers. To this we add appropriate hymns and songs from our library of video music recordings, or maybe record a new one, and mix it together into that week's AsWAG video, which we post online at some point on the Saturday, so that it is available from then on whenever people want to tune into it.

We can't of course, have a zoom chat afterwards over coffee, but we are pleased to hear from our online congregation as they message in to us. We know that we are regularly joined from all across the country and occasionally further afield. We try to emphasise a sense of belonging; that they are part of us, that this online meeting place is their church fellowship, alongside all those who join them, wherever and whenever, and that the place where they are watching it is their sacred space. A different kind of 'church', with different potential.

We've broadened the reach - we now upload each week's video to the circuit's facebook page and post links to local community facebook sites. Although we never know how many join us each week, the range of people responding confirms that our online congregation appears to be significantly larger than our live congregation. For some AsWAG is their unmissable weekly time of devotion, for others it is a useful alternative if for any reason they are unable to attend Sunday worship, and yet others find it a helpful time of reflection, maybe at some point during the week, in addition to their Sunday worship.

We have no idea where this will lead. It might continue for a while yet in much its current format. It might die a natural death. Or it might evolve into a more committed online faith community. God knows!

If you would like to receive a link to As We Are Gathered (you don't need to be on facebook) please let us know at blackshawhead.chapel@me.com, and we'll add you to our contact list. Or you can find us (and all our back-catalogue of videos!) here : www.facebook.com/BlackshawHeadChapel/