

Part 4

**WELCOMING  
THE CROWDS  
WHEN  
LOCKDOWN IS  
OVER**

# PART 4: WELCOMING THE CROWDS WHEN LOCKDOWN IS OVER

Many of the church ministers we have consulted have told us the experience of lockdown will change their church for ever. One free-church minister in West Sussex wrote: 'The situation is forcing us to ask questions we have not asked before. It will change how we do church whenever this lockdown is over.' A vicar in Derbyshire said, 'I've known for some time that we should have been online but we did nothing about it. Now I know we have to stay online when this is all over.'

So do not imagine that when the lockdown ends you can 'return to normal'. The emergency is forcing us to gaze in through a massive mission-window we hadn't realised was more than a tiny slit. When people get busy again they might be slightly less inclined to take in a church service. But we hope that, from now on, many churches will always have an online presence and that services will always be livestreamed in some way or other. Setting up good online welcoming practices should be not a temporary expedient but a permanent mission-advance. There might also be a wave of new people turning up in person when churches re-open because they have so appreciated the online version.

## Resources

Find helpful information on streaming services online at:

- This is a 17 minute video on how to [physically equip your church building to livestream](#).
- A [step-by-step beginner's guide to going live with your service or event](#) using YouTube, Facebook and Instagram.
- The Church of England provides webinars on streaming which you can book into [here](#).

## Timing

Livestreaming for lockdown may last a while:

1. When lockdown ends some people may be too frightened to attend church in person.
2. The pandemic may go in waves so lockdowns could be re-imposed for periods several times over the next year or two
3. Mrs Merkel announced on April 15 that unlocking in Germany will gradually start in early May with small shops, hairdressers and schools re-opening. However, large public gatherings and religious services will remain banned until August 31st. Germany is ahead of the UK. If Germany is anything to go by, do not expect your church building to re-open for worship until at least September. Every church should now set up an online presence if it does not wish to suffer the impact of being closed for at least six months. Some churches, after such a hibernation, may never reopen at all.
4. Suppose, on 'Unlock Sunday' your building is not yet equipped, do you simply tell your new onliners they can come to the building if they wish, otherwise you have no

further interest in them? Far better to maintain a stopgap online-only offering until the building is equipped.

So keep learning and honing the skills, don't imagine they will be redundant for ever in a few weeks' time. If you have been wavering about whether to do online services because it might soon be over then think again. And start planning for the new era of livestreaming when churches do eventually reopen.

**Make 'Unlock Sunday' the greatest 'welcome to church' day ever and the start of a new era.**

## Strategic Options

The main option choices for the long term would appear to be:

1. **Just try to keep congregations ticking over until we can get back to normal in our buildings.** Please don't think like this!
2. **Invite online contacts to further explore the faith with online steps such as an enquirers' course.** Well worth a try. Pencil in an enquirers' course to start when lockdown ends even if you have one during lockdown. There may be all sorts of people, not just online visitors, who have developed a need and desire for this through their lockdown experience. Advertise it during online events and on the website and offer to conduct it using Zoom. If they opt for face to face then fine, but offer the option. St Chad's Romiley have already advertised an online Alpha in the online services and are about to start it with at least eight participants.
3. **Make better contacts with the wider fringe and encourage some to join in the physical gathered community that is 'proper' church.** Experience says that online is an excellent stepping-stone to 'in person' – so encourage people in that direction. But this won't work for all so you have to retain online presence.
4. **Set up a separate online congregation alongside the gathered ones.** We would like to find out whether this would work but have our doubts. If permanent online-only



church were easily viable we would have lots of them already. Can the intrinsic human need for community and belonging be fully satisfied for ever in virtual space? When lockdown ends, the instinct to gather may be stronger than ever. Adding a dedicated online service would involve a lot of extra effort compared with simply filming what happens in church anyway.

5. **Livestream regular services in order to include people who can't or won't be part of a gathered congregation.** This is going to be a natural outcome for many churches. Those contacted through the lockdown weeks – plus others – can be offered the chance to view existing services in the church building when they re-start. This may work very well for many people, including those physically unable to attend or who live in care homes or those for whom a physical visit to church is a bit too stressful to contemplate. It may work for many younger people, including those whose partners would disapprove of a physical visit to church. This is worth doing even if the online participants are simply silent individuals watching a gathered community without being part of it. But leaving it at that will miss most of the benefit.
6. **Use interactive livestreaming to grow a blended, fluid online-in-person church community.** We think this is usually the best option. An online pastor offers welcome and some commentary as people log on and say hello through the comments box. The onliners could join after church refreshments in a Zoom room. They would be invited to small groups and other dimensions of church life. Some people would come in person one week and be online the next. Shift and Sunday workers could catch up on a different day. The average churchgoer pre-lockdown attended the service only one week in two. Having the service available online all week might greatly increase frequency rates and even enable a revival of sequential preaching. Friendship-welcome would be offered to all online and in person newcomers equally. This is not a model of participants and spectators but of a single, complex, fluid, open community.
7. **Vary the format on different weeks.** The 9am 'Early Church' for families at Eyam currently meets twice a month. During lockdown it has gone online, attracted extra people and enabled families to do much of the ministry and leadership. When lockdown ends the twice a month in-person services will probably resume without any filming. But in a third week we may well continue the online 'home' style that is proving popular at the moment, blending in person and online in one community by week of the month.

## Get Prepared

1. **Technology and kit.** Churches should be preparing the technology for this now as a matter of urgency. We foresee a massive business opportunity for anyone able to offer a one-stop shop to equip churches for livestreaming their events and services. However, there may be such a scramble to get set up when lockdown ends that the waiting list for kit and people to fit it will be horrendously

long. Wise churches will research what they need and buy the kit now as a matter of urgency, then fit it as soon as they regain access to their buildings. Ideally there should be not a week lost between lockdown ending and livestreaming of a church service beginning. There will be all sorts of other benefits and uses of good kit once you have it. For example, the minister could record introductions to home-group sessions. Our church gets a lot of visitors so we could have a screen showing last Sunday's worship for visitors to dip into.

2. **Skills and training.** A whole new set of technical skills has become needed for the good and growth of the church. Every church should seek out people among its friends, fringe or members who have the skills needed. Gaps should be plugged by finding training opportunities for people to acquire the needed skills. **We would love those possessing good level technical knowledge and skills for online church who can share this with others to let us know and we'll put your contact details up on our site.**
3. **Welcome and relationships.** Imagine the scene on the first Sunday your church is allowed to open. Those regulars brave enough to start meeting other people will be overjoyed to see each other again and in many churches there will be much hugging and rejoicing. In others, people may even smile at each other momentarily. However, disconcertingly, there are also a number of strangers who have turned up. These are people who had been accessing the services online during lockdown – and they actually already think of themselves as belonging to the church community even if they haven't been in the flesh before. But the regulars ignore them in their delight at old friends so the newcomers leave disappointed and disillusioned. If you think this may be a plausible scenario in your church then prepare your congregation for this key event. Appoint some to look out for strangers, to talk to them and integrate them into what is happening. Acknowledge newcomers from the front and get their names and contact details so you know which of your onliners is there and can continue developing the relationship. And we know the perfect training course for your congregation – Everybody Welcome (Leaders Manual, Members manual and DVD) written by the two of us!

Available from [Church House Publishing](#).

