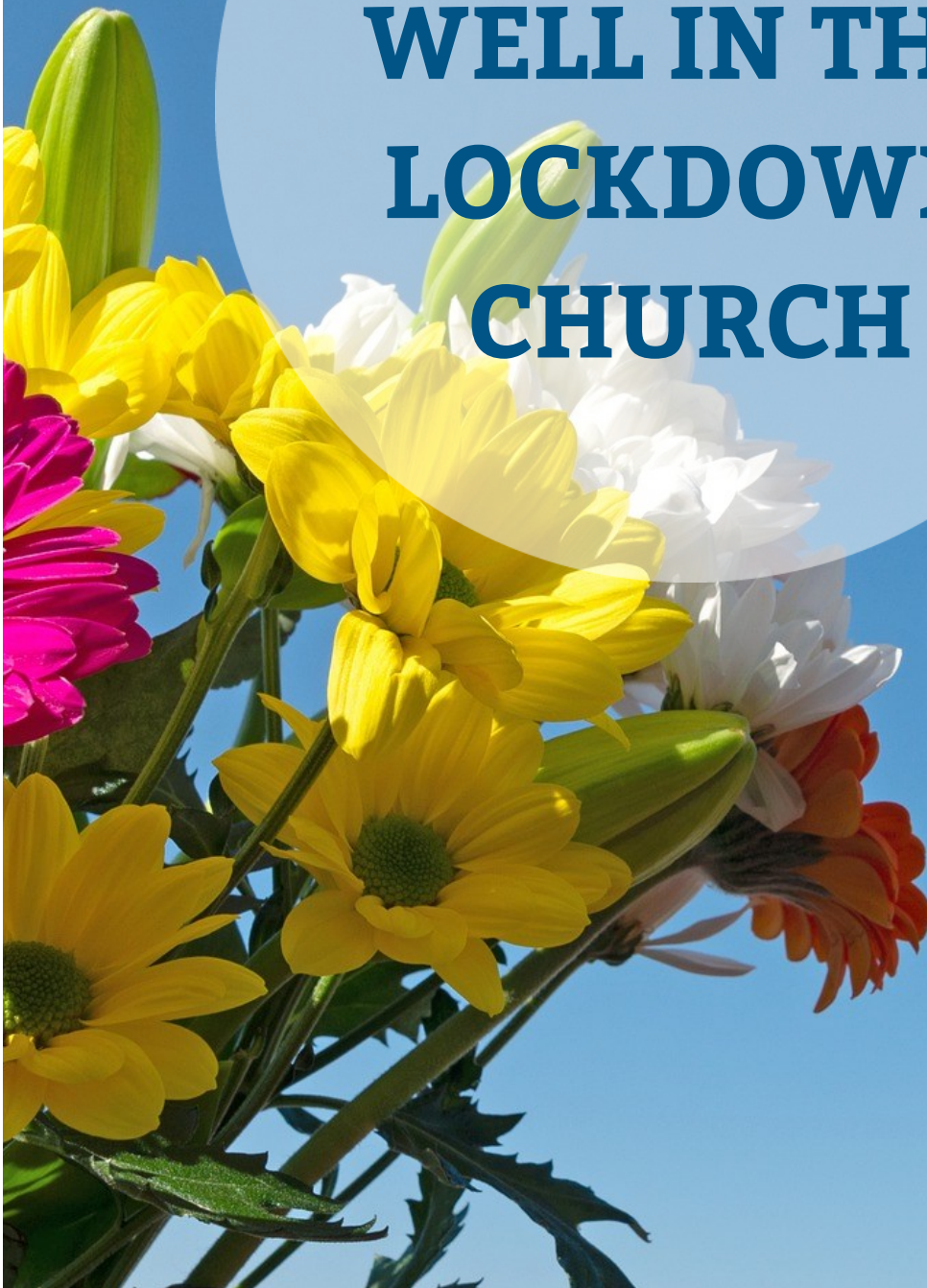


Part 3

WELCOMING WELL IN THE LOCKDOWN CHURCH



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Doing Online Church Well During Lockdown

The lockdown has opened up a mission imperative in an age of uncertainty when people are having their values challenged and being reminded of their mortality. Many are lonely, afraid and bored. Others are over-worked and desperate for support. How can we make the most of the kit available, engage our own welcoming instincts, relate well online, put together newcomer-friendly worship and follow up those who reach out to us?

You can google 'online church' or 'Images of online church' and a whole world of wonders will explode on to your screen. We don't aspire to replicate that but to assemble practical wisdom for ordinary churches, learnt the hard way in the early weeks of lockdown church, and to start a learning community from which we can all benefit.

People are not turning to us for chummy chat and whizz kid tech but to find God and the numinous, to make sense of lives turned upside down. Encounter with the living God is the true test of quality and the reason they will return.

Safeguarding and Online Safety

Be mindful of the safeguarding implications of moving church services, home groups, personal contact and youth work online. Normal safeguarding processes should still apply. Your

church safeguarding officer should be involved in planning and risk assessments. Those offering pastoral care online on behalf of the church should have been trained and authorised. Be as alert as usual to potential issues with those joining you online or on Zoom. The Church of England website provides advice for using video conferencing for youth work and signposts you to 'Creating safer spaces online' produced by Youthscape. Anglicans should contact their Diocesan Safeguarding Team with concerns or questions, and other denominations will have similar arrangements.

Platforms

Most churches we have come across are using one of three platforms – Zoom, Facebook and YouTube. Some especially younger churches use Instagram. They are all free and accessible to most people. For example, you do not have to be on Facebook yourself to access a Website Facebook page, but you won't be able to use the comments box. The other main choice is whether to pre-record or livestream.

Other platforms include [Vimeo](https://vimeo.com/) and churchonlineplatform.com as well as various options you can purchase.

In the early lockdown weeks, people have been grateful for whatever clergy and churches have been able to do, very forgiving of technical hitches and limited formats. In fact,



homespun has been better than slick. But, as the weeks roll by, the aim should be to get a little bit better at this each time, raising both the technical and content quality of what goes out. If they can't hear it properly, the camera wobbles and the same person each week is beginning to run out of ideas, people will start dropping off. So focus on improving quality and recruit anyone who can help you do this. It will be a team effort not a solo performance. But try not to turn into a televangelist! Stay rooted, human, caring, local.

Zoom

Zoom is being used effectively for a lot of internal church meetings but some also use it for live services. The App is easy to load. The big problem is that you have to be invited and given a code in order to join the meeting, so it feels more like an insiders' club – everything we are trying to get away from as we open ourselves up to the online world. Entry level Zoom is free but if you want meetings to last over 40 minutes and some other features someone will have to pay. The screen can take up to 100 devices, but it is possible to arrange an extension to go bigger. You may think 100 faces on a TV screen will all be exceedingly small but you can scroll up and down smaller numbers at any one time. There is a danger of talking across each other so the host has to keep firm control, but that is also true of church in person. And you can actually see each other and exchange some conversation.

Nevertheless, plenty of smaller and medium sized churches are using Zoom happily.

Zoom can in fact be recorded then put on YouTube or Facebook for later viewing, though of course the later viewer can't join the discussion or have their face painted in retrospectively!

When scheduling a regular zoom meeting set it as recurring and choose the option 'no fixed time'. That way the link remains the same from week to week.

One church publicises the Zoom service on Facebook and the church website and invites people to click and request a link to participate in the service. The vicar then welcomes each person who joins the service taking special care with newcomers. At the end the vicar again goes round all the participants and they report that it feels like quite a community has formed, also inviting people to a virtual 'tea with the vicar' for a further chat. It is very easy to disrupt a zoom service, and it is not really suited to services where there are children present. But we have heard no horror stories yet. To ensure personal attention, as numbers grow some churches may need to multiply their number of Zoom services. Some of these may then be able to continue after Lockdown.

A vicar in Sheffield puts it like this:

'We are using zoom for online worship. The hyperlink to join is made available on our web site. Invitations are sent out through our electronic database. We are finding that people join us who are very much on the fringe of our church, who are rarely seen on a Sunday (Christmas/Easter visitors usually) and we have had some who we don't know at all.

Joining zoom gives a much greater feel of fellowship than any other livestreaming experience, and this allows the possibility of actually talking to the visitor (admittedly, not easy when you don't know who they are and everyone can hear the conversation). The numbers will never compete with Facebook connectivity but it may be that one zoom link is worth 50 Facebook glances!'

Facebook and YouTube

These two platforms are the key if you are looking for accessibility and the option for people to post comments, and they are both easy to set up. Some churches are using both so they can reach more people. One key advantage with YouTube is that people can watch it on any Smart TV which means it is much easier to view, especially for a household, and there are fewer problems with volume thereby enabling people to sing along. Another key advantage is that it is easily searchable in all search engines whereas Facebook videos do not pop up in them. Many churches publish their services on both, as well as putting them on their website. A detailed comparison can be found at www.epiphan.com/blog/youtube-or-facebook/.

If you are putting posts, photos and videos on your website Facebook page you should ideally learn how to delete the old ones, otherwise people will not be able to find the current needles in the Facebook haystack. This apparently is possible but not easy. Go to the Facebook Help Centre for direction. If you crack this one and can explain the click sequence could you let us know?



You can find out quite a lot about people joining a Facebook service if you ask everyone to enter a comment at the start and make responses as the service continues and click on 'like' or 'love'. You can then interact with them and also look at their Facebook profiles.

Having a live host enables repartee and welcome as people log in, and finding a household with lots of people in it can help. Our Easter Sunday Messy-Style service at Eyam was hosted by a family of six.

During Lockdown simple 'livestreaming' is often only one person giving a talk to camera. Some churches have started this way but are quickly looking for how to enrich the content and format. There is a piece of free software called 'OBS' ([Open Broadcast Software](#)) you can download to any computer. This operates with Facebook and allows you to set up a series of 'scenes' for your livestreamed service. Scenes could be still photos or video. You can mix a soundtrack from the church organist with people singing the hymn.

Churches who pre-record their services can 'premier' them on YouTube or Facebook. This means it is set for a particular time so that you can advertise your service to your congregation and more widely. A step by step beginner's guide to 'premiering' your service for free using Facebook and YouTube is available at www.churchofengland.org.

If premiering on YouTube, the chat opens 30 mins before it goes live. One church put out the question 'Who could you invite to join us this morning in the next few minutes?' A great way to encourage people to invite their friends.

Perhaps the ideal, if you can manage the technology, is to have well prepared and presented video to mix with livestreaming and then be left on YouTube. The best of both worlds.

Instagram

Instagram is the best, most commonly used, platform to use for connecting with Youth and Young Adults. Every action, other than private messages, is completely public. Instagram users can post either main feed posts or Instagram stories. Stories disappear after 24 hours and tend to be more informal. Similarly to Facebook, Instagram allows you to do livestreams, the advantage of Instagram being that you can invite another

person to join the livestream which allows for more interaction. Through a livestream, a church or youth group may host Q & A, bible studies and games such as Pictionary or a quiz. Like Facebook, people can comment in a live chat. Instagram's IGTV allows users to upload videos of up to 10 minutes in length which appear in the Instagram feed of those who follow the account. This is a helpful way of producing content for young people without needing to direct them to a YouTube channel. A series of bite sized IGTV teaching/worship/interview videos may be better than a big indigestible 45 minutes meal of a church service.

Bad News – It's Babel Out There

Some people communicate by parish magazine, landline and garden fence. Others by email, website and Facebook. Then there is the Instagram, Tik Tok and Snapchat generation. Churches should try to serve everyone, so ideally should be multi-lingual communicators. Use as many languages as you can. Larger churches need a comms team.

Good News – Even Limited Expertise Works

Churches are exploring what content to use and this partly depends on what expertise and facilities they have. Here are some typical comments we have received from church leaders:

A simple shortened service, not trying to replicate what we do in church, though still containing the heart of it – actually 'repackaging' the heart of it – is both exciting and creative and more work than it looks. Not worrying about being slick in any way – home-made authenticity seems most powerful.

I've been recording and mixing on iMovie. I brought in music from my Musical Director, got readers and so on from church via Zoom. This meant that all the services are just like your normal Sunday service. If people then come to the physical church it will be what they are used to from the virtual.

Vary the visual content, so that people aren't looking at the Vicar for the whole of a service, with appropriate pictures, music, members of the community reading lessons, intercessions and so on. Have the words for hymns, responses etc. scrolling along the bottom of the screen. Check for inappropriate material in the background.

The different parts of the service, songs, prayers, bible readings, talk and so on are recorded by people who usually do these on a regular Sunday. We find this keeps some continuity for viewers/congregation and for those taking part. Helpful instructions are given such as recording in a quiet space, using something to stand your phone or camera on and most of all smile. I think



it should definitely be a team effort, the church is more than one or two, and everyone should be involved where they can. All the services are all age as well rather than the once or twice month that they ran in church so as to engage the children whilst Children's Church and crèche are not available.

Welcome People to the Church, Not a TV Programme

We can't be so taken up communicating with new people that we ignore the existing church community, who will look for echoes of familiarity, reassurance, community. But most of all we seek God, a new truth for a new age from the Scripture, wine outpoured, deep prayer, spiritual strength for the week ahead. The core task is do our best for the people we know. And there is no harm in letting people see how we love one another and so want to share in that love.

But sharing God at spiritual depth is also what will attract and feed others. Newcomers should experience the church as it really is. Yes there need to be plenty of packaging-adaptations both to being online and to having a much wider group of people accessing the service. The list of good practices below is geared towards welcoming the newcomer. But that has to be within the context of the character of the existing church community and the way it worships.

God is the great welcomer. The Holy Trinity – that perfect community of love – beckons us to join in and is prepared for all the change that brings. The community of Christ has been welcomed into the kingdom of heaven. That community must for ever be looking out to welcome others. The ideal online welcome is therefore made by the church community, not just a livestreamer. Spread around the church community the job of following up the people identified online. We can't knock on their doors at the moment but most people can phone or contact on social media and make a new friend. Don't get swamped – mobilise the community of welcome, give them one contact each. 'Hello, I'm calling on behalf of the church to say how lovely it was to see you at online church yesterday'.

Some in your church will be energised by all the new action, like people were in 'The War'. But others – contemplatives, introverts, technophobes – will get stressed out by it all. Not everyone needs to become a Zoom expert, leave some people in relative peace. You are nurturing people along a marathon not a sprint.

Some Good Practice Suggestions

The early weeks of going online have been a hand-to-mouth existence for many of us. But now is the time to take stock, pull together a planning and operations team, and get organised. Spread the work around and use other people's skill sets. For example, ask someone methodical to keep a log of whatever statistics your platform throws up. This will be the equivalent of your service register and show up the numbers trend and



the impact of any advertising. Below is a list of good practice suggestions to check out:

1. Don't look at the centre of your iPad/laptop screen or whatever you are using. Make eye contact with the camera lens shown by the light.
2. Involve your whole church community in spreading news of the online service and how to access it by social and traditional media and word of mouth.
3. Whichever platform you use, promote your service on other platforms. Try a local Facebook ad but keep the area small so you are not annoying other churches and competing with their adverts.
4. You can email out readings and liturgy so that people can join in at home, and also put this on the website and draw peoples' attention to this at the start of the service.
5. At the start and end of every service specifically mention and welcome visitors and newcomers as valued members of this new community. For a good example of how to welcome onliners look at a service on the website of St Paul's Dorking. The welcome includes practical offers of support from the church congregation, such as food parcels, together with an email address and a phone number for people to contact the church during the service. People are manning a laptop for the emails and a phone for the messages to respond as the service proceeds.

Here is some sample wording:

Wording at the start of livestreaming

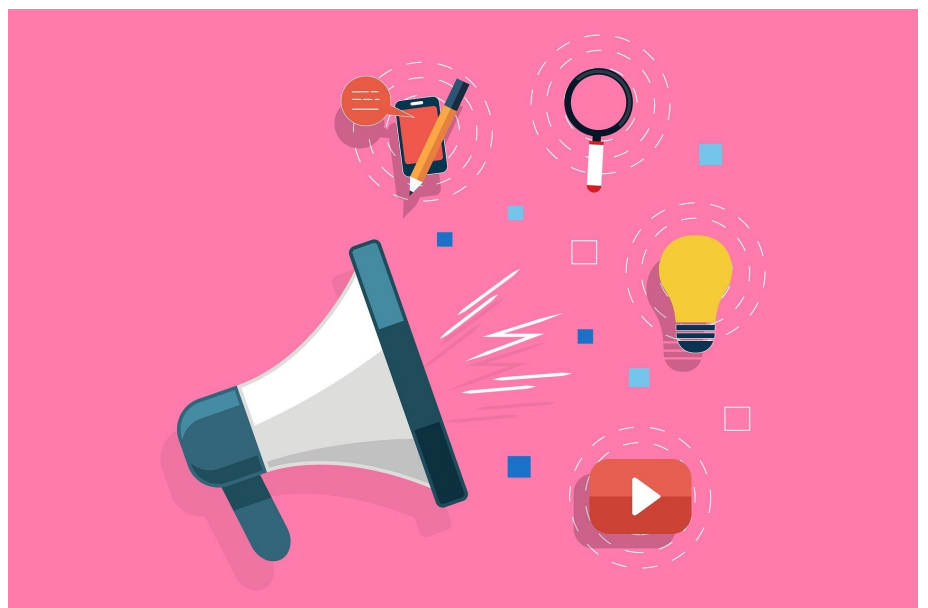
Welcome everyone. I'd especially like to welcome anyone new or who has not been a regular member of our church in the past. I hope you feel fully part of this online worshipping community today and that you find you can meet with God through the service.

Wording at the end of livestreaming

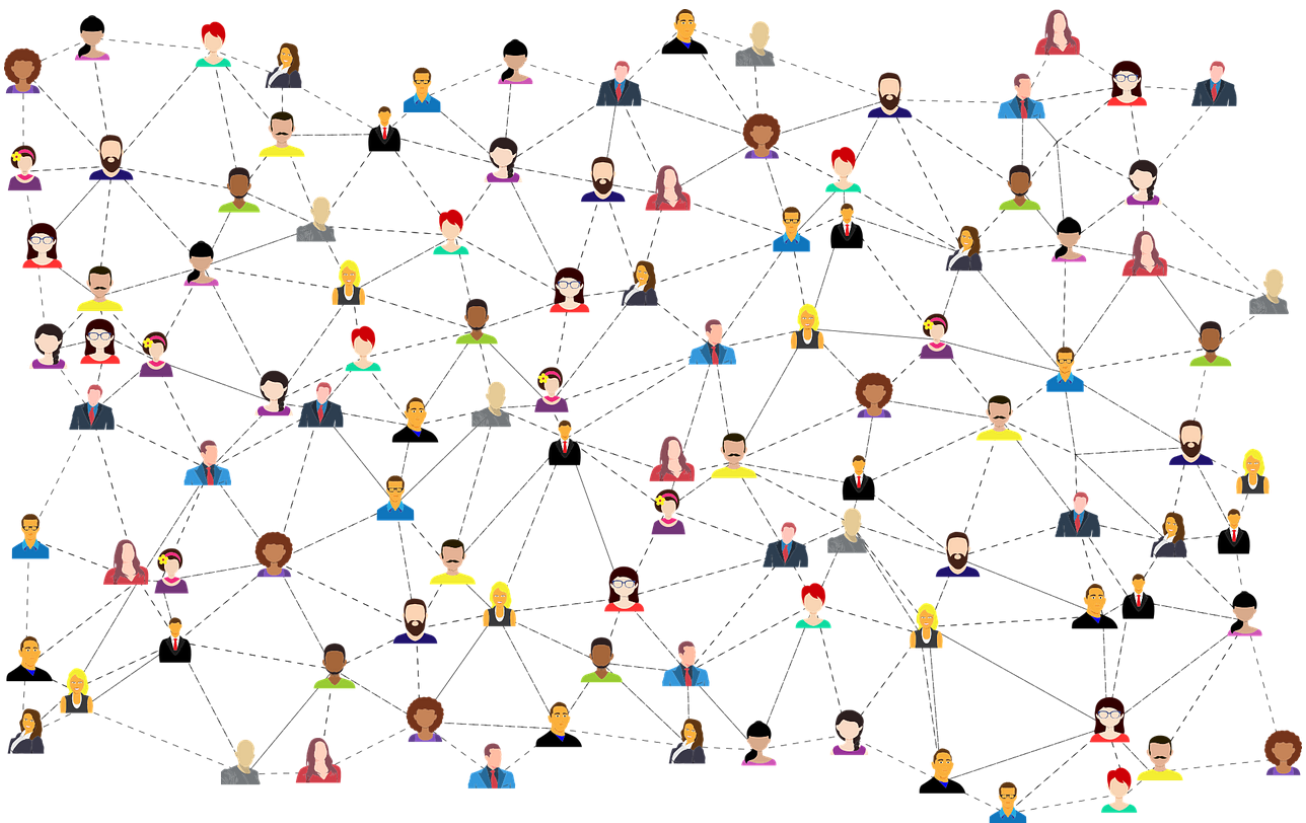
That's the end of our livestreamed service this week. But I'd just like to say that, if you are new to St George's, you are especially welcome. We'll be here at the same time next Sunday. In the meantime I would love to hear from you by email. I'd especially love to know how you came to join our service today and whether we can help you further on your spiritual journey in these unusual times. Just drop a brief email to bobthevic@gmail.com and we will respond to you.

6. Make multiple references to your physical location – eventually you hope people will find you in person.
7. Use 'online hosts' on your YouTube feed to welcome and engage with people on the chat function

8. Some churches are finding that people are not engaging well with sung worship by singing in their own homes. Reduce the number of songs to one or two - or show a good performance item.
9. With pre-recorded services you can still use Facebook at the end of the designated service time to chat and engage with people – it's the handshake on the way out.
10. Make the online service as responsive as possible:
 - Responsive prayers with the response words on the screen.
 - Invite people to have a Bible with them to follow the reading and talk, though you can always put up the words as you read the passage.
 - Use silence.
 - Invite people to write their own prayers in the message box so everyone can see them floating up the screen. Encourage likes and so on.
 - Invite people to contact your team there and then – have a team of welcomers manning an email address or a phone for messages and responding immediately.
11. Timing: it is rare for people to watch a platform for more than 30-40 minutes. So you may want to shorten your online service and it is essential to get across your welcome and message immediately you begin. Target the opening at newbies and visitors. Give them a way of saying hello – such as a comments box if on Facebook. And summarise your message of hope in troubled times.
12. Have people on hand to respond to comments that come in, looking out especially for visitors. Personal contact is key - when a guest pops up on the Facebook comments stream it may be possible to link them with someone they already know. Envision church members for friendship evangelism. Offer a website for people to email. But let them be in charge of their own process. Treat them as individuals and don't try to corral them down some rigid route you have invented. But have in mind the sort of second steps that are practical in your situation. Be ready with an online Zoom Alpha Course.



13. It is vital if someone contacts you that you make a first response within 24 hours. You will probably need to get a team up and running for this sort of thing. Don't try to do everything yourself. Someone should be keeping a log of the names of people who have contacted you online and the type of contact. This will help you respond to people appropriately and not forget someone.
14. Keep the language seeker-friendly, don't exclude people with insider lingo. Ask people in your congregation to spot your language barrier phrases and tell you.
15. Be sensitive to the presence of a wide range of people when presenting the service and cut out the jargon. One minister wrote: 'Our Easter service has already had over 1100 views on YouTube so we know people are watching. That has influenced how we preach and what we preach on – shorter messages and very gospel/Jesus focussed.'
16. It may be that the most powerful content at the moment (isn't it always?) is stories. Get people to tell their story or testimony and include one in an online service. The person will need to script it and practice at home to record on their device. It should be short (two to four minutes), real and recent and be about an experience of God in their lives.
17. Or try 'sofa talks' – a Zoom interview from two sofas in two houses on a relevant subject such as 'how do we deal with worry?' Record separately in the two homes then stitch together. Incorporate into the streamed service and use it as a stand-alone YouTube video.
18. At the end encourage people to 'like' the service and share it. That is one way it will ripple out through the local community over the coming week.
19. Always tell people how they can take a next step if they wish to – otherwise you are implying they are very welcome to watch but you have no further interest in them after that. A next step will almost inevitably mean them revealing themselves to you. That should be their unpressurised decision but it is the key that unlocks everything else. Offer an introductory course like Alpha or START you can do on Zoom.
20. Blessing people properly is particularly powerful and needed at the moment. Make it an important element of the service. It may be the last time someone is blessed or prayed with before they go to hospital and die in isolation.
21. Explore using Zoom for after-church coffee and invite people to join in. If you are a large church you may need several Zoom rooms. A Zoom organiser might split people up so they have to talk to people other than their immediate friends.
22. Look at Insights on Facebook and Analytics on YouTube to see what is happening during your stream. Zero-in on retention metrics. Don't get wrapped up in how many people viewed your content, but how long they watched for, and how many people engaged during the service.
23. If you are a Church of England church, 'A Church Near You' shows which churches are livestreaming so make sure you inform them.
24. Some churches record a CD of the service for those not able to access the internet and send it out to them. In some cases others in the household who do not normally attend church might join in.
25. People read the comments. Encourage church members to have conversations in the comments section about the material and their reactions. Encourage the church to have public conversations about their everyday faith and



reactions to content in the comments section. People will and do read that stuff! In fact they are probably more interested in what everyone else is saying than what the pastor in the video is saying.

26. Have people monitor old posts. Stuff still gets viewed after the event. Pick up 'late' likes and comments.
27. You can offer an invitation to something 'face-to-face' once normal socialising is permitted. 'If you enjoyed the online service today, why not try coming to St Bob's when our services resume? We'd love to welcome you in person.' Or, when a date for resuming socialising is known you could invite new online worshippers to a gentle social event to meet you and each other.
28. Ensure that you have the copyright permission you need if you are using music. Your existing licences may be sufficient but details are at: www.rscm.org.uk. Further details from CCLI can be found at: uk.ccli.com. You cannot broadcast YouTube songs you happen to find as that is breach of copyright and Facebook will put a stop to it. So find ways to make, record and broadcast your own music.
29. Other useful links:
 - [ChurchEdit](#).
 - [Love Black Country](#).
 - This is a really useful link to: '[Community in a Crisis - relational sustainable online church](#)'.

Here are four examples of what churches are doing:

- a. We're livestreaming Sunday morning on Facebook. We go live ten minutes before service starts, and I keep an eye on comments stream and say hi to people on the livestream as they join – including newcomers/folk from distance. I also encourage people to say hi on the comments. At the end we have a few Zoom rooms open after the stream – one for general chat, one for kids, and one for newcomers or people who want to know more, although we haven't actually had anyone come to this yet. We're working on a virtual equivalent of our welcome/address capture card.
- b. We have been livestreaming pre-recorded services on Facebook and YouTube, and have noticed how important the comments section can be for creating a sense of interaction. In particular, we have tried to make sure those who aren't regular members are noticed and acknowledged. This may be a more general comment 'Welcome everybody, and a special welcome to anyone who is joining us for the first time', or if we have some vague connection we might welcome them by name. We have also tried to make sure we interact with any comments visitors make during the service, even if this is just the 'like' button. Before each livestream begins we decide who is posting as 'St Matthew's' and then the rest of the team post as themselves - this helps people to know that they're engaging with a whole community rather than an anonymous organisation.
- c. We are livestreaming services, using OBS (Open Broadcaster Software) via Facebook live, so that it is accessible to all. Facebook saves the streamed service as video, but we also up-load the video to YouTube for extra

accessibility. We do not specifically single out our newcomers. We welcome everyone, sometimes by name as they join the stream. We post a screen at the beginning with details of all our streamed services as a general invitation, and another at the end with contact information. We end the stream with a short spoken repeat of all that information (service times and contact information), as well as another general invitation to get in touch. Most are returning regularly and commenting via the comments bar on Facebook. We respond to the comments, thereby engaging individually. We are finding this works well, and feels less segregated than specifically mentioning newcomers – the new community is building organically without divisions; in a sense everyone is new, because the method of meeting is new.

- d. I began Zoom Sunday services. These have been well received and I have enjoyed leading them. We have had guests from across the country as well as members of the congregation from across the benefice. The services have been advertised: in parish newsletters, on Facebook and word of mouth. The Zoom services are surprisingly spiritual and ministerially rewarding. Online services and electronic media is not my comfort zone, I have had to learn new things very quickly but I believe it is necessary at this time. I have been pleased with how well it is going. To be honest I have had more compliments on my ministry in the last three weeks of lockdown that I have had in the three years of incumbency. That may be a little sad but it shows that something is working.

Websites

We guess that many churches have just discovered their website is not fit for purpose. At the very least you should be able to add and delete content yourselves. If not, take urgent steps to acquire this ability. A good website is not a notice board but a portal through which the visitor can beam



themselves up to meet you. One church has a button to press so you can arrange a Zoom meeting with the Alpha organiser. It should be a route to online services, to a FaceTime chat with the vicar, or whatever routes are appropriate for you.

Make sure that up front and central on your website homepage is a warm welcome to the casual browser who may possibly access an online service or some other offering. Online service information should be near the top of the homepage. Minimise the number of clicks needed to access material. Here is a sample wording:

Welcome to everyone – a message from our vicar

Our church services haven't stopped just because the building has closed. We have gone online so it is really easy to find us on Sunday morning at 10. Click the Facebook link below and you are in. You don't need to be on Facebook yourself.

And if you have been accessing our livestreamed services, or simply looking at our website, welcome! Perhaps you find church online easier to try out than a physical building, perhaps these extraordinary times have triggered something spiritually inside you, perhaps you would appreciate linking with a Christian community. If, for whatever reason, you would appreciate some human contact with our church, or have a question, then please email me at bobthevic@gmail.com and we will respond to you.

Does Online Preclude Contemporary Styles of Worship?

It does seem relatively easy for a vicar to livestream a service, doing everything themselves in the old-fashioned way. Much harder to replicate a service with many people contributing or a families' worship event like Messy Church or one with inspiring music. However, with ingenuity there is always a way. The music group leader at my son's church laid down their own instrument track at home then sent it round the other members in turn to film their track. The band was then put together and led singing for the streamed service. This is a wonderful opportunity to get tech-savvy families to produce inspiring home-videos and to ask others to host the livestreaming or make contributions on phone videos. In my church it was the children by video who conveyed the Easter story most memorably and attractively. We should build on that when lockdown ends.

Lucy Moore, the founder of Messy Church, at first thought that most Messy Churches would sit out the lockdown and resume when it was over. However large numbers have been determined to keep going with regular craft suggestions and Bible verses being sent round their families, and pastoral phone calls to see if they are okay. Some, like our own, have

kept their events going with a mix of posts, video and livestreaming. A Baptist Church in Doncaster distributed 'Messy Church in a Bag' to 400 homes.

Messy Church are adjusting their online resources to fit the new situation. The run up to Easter gave the churches obvious activities and an extra motive. Post Easter is a new challenge.

Some youth groups have gone Zoom, others are posting alternatives to standard worship, such as interviews, that are more natural online. A few churches, such as HTB, are offering specialist youth worship that all can access. Youth for Christ have made some good materials available. Instagram is likely to be the preferred platform.

Messy Church at BRF has committed to providing an outline session each week for families to do Messy Church at home until at least the end of June, available free from www.messychurch.org.uk.

