Online Ministry

October 2023

With 4.66 billion people online - 59.5 percent of the global population we cannot ignore what the pandemic has taught us but we don't have do the exact same thing online, as we did in the pandemic. This guide looks at how you identify your community, how you could engage with them and some ideas for doing ministry online.

Online Ministry – some considerations to using digital channels for ministry

A 2021 Office for National Statistics survey that gathered data in early 2020 showed that 92% of adults in the UK were recent internet users, with the take up for those aged over 75 years (54%) having almost doubled since the prior survey in 2013 (29%).

Our own Church mission statistics for 2020 showed huge creativity across our churches as the pandemic hit, our church buildings closed, and we transitioned to offer worship and support for our communities online. This marked a huge step change and learning curve for us all as we connected in new ways with our congregations and much wider through this period.

We have now returned to a new normal post pandemic but whilst physically gathering to worship in our church buildings will always be central to our church life, an online offering should remain a key component for every church regardless of size, geography or age demographic.

October Attendance Report - key stats:

70 out of 144 churches reported online ministry in 2022. This is down from 92 churches in 2021.

Estimated online attendance adds 17% to onsite attendance figures.

Churches with online provision recovered 76% of their 2019 attendance.

Churches without online provision recovered 73% of their 2019 attendance.

The above is significant as larger churches are more likely to have online provision but we know larger churches have recovered less well than smaller churches.

Our recent October Attendance Report comparing 2019 attendance with 2022 has highlighted that online attendance is still significant and does not detract from onsite attendance in fact may help the church grow and thrive. The choice should no longer be whether we connect online, it should be to determine what that online offering could include, depending on the local needs, people groups and the resources available.

Where are we now?

The pandemic catapulted us into needing to provide a whole range of online ministry across our churches. Between us we grew in confidence in offering a wide range of prayer and

ministry resources online, from posting simple text, through to Zoom meetings and providing full blown online services. This demanded new skills, drew heavily on many in our congregations and required a new level of sharing across parishes.

Some churches invested in new production and streaming equipment, others were very innovative with quite simple technology such as a smartphone or laptop combined with applications like Zoom and others made greater use of their website or Facebook pages.

Together we discovered that online can offer greater:

- Accessibility for those who need it and want it
- Choice (in terms of service you join, time you join it, how you join it)
- Convenience and flexibility – I can choose when I engage
- Opportunity for learning
- Creativity and increased interactivity

We learnt that an online offering is not just about church services, it is also about offering training and courses; online fellowship communities; prayer groups and so much more. We also appreciate that for many parishes, coming out of CV19 restrictions meant they wanted to focus on their in-person services and activities. We need to recognise that there is a perception that online ministry could be competing against in-person services – this is not the case and research supports that online ministry enables those who would otherwise not be able to attend in person, as well as being a window to the church before you might attend in person   For some, online ministry made church accessible for the first time but in 2023, we are aware that some churches have dropped online all together whilst others are continuing lockdown practices rather than updating practices or adopting novel and new practices. There is a lot of potential in this space to help to grow disciples, embrace fresh expressions of church online and reach those who want to stay as digital disciples growing in fellowship together online.

Where we want to get to

We imagine a Church where every parish can offer the most suitable, sustainable online option alongside their in person offering, if required by their community.

We imagine a Church where we can reach our community where they are, enabling parishes to engage with their community in the most suitable and engaging way, online and in person.

What does that mean in practice?
The pandemic has boosted the use of all social networks/digital channels and as we continue

to rebuild it will be critical to understand the role that online and social media could play in doing church and communicating the love of Jesus Christ. It has been especially important as our people started to meet in person again, but some wanted to remain only in the digital space and as such has created a new potential community and missional opportunity.

Each parish will need to make decisions, as they do with all parts of their ministry, where they put their resources and efforts going forward and how best to connect online. But this consideration should include every part of their ministry and every age group - services, home groups, fellowship, meetings etc.

They realise the opportunities available to them and are equipped and enabled to deliver these to further their mission and community. That this is seen as an enabler and not an additional admin/logistical burden. That online ministry is seen as enhancing their discipleship, community, mission and work, and not competing with in-person activities and events.

In some cases, and for some demographics it may be that the offering is more effective as something offered primarily online whereas for others it may be that the primary offering is in person but with some of the resources made accessible online.

Whenever any new event, meeting or service is planned, the online provision should automatically be considered as part of the planning. This should not be seen as an add-on but an inclusive and normal part of everything that we offer regardless of age.

This will require us to continue to learn together, to grow our experience, confidence and skills over time. But we shouldn't see this as a burden for our parish leadership teams, but something that provides an opportunity for us to draw on the skills and experience of our lay members.

Inevitably some churches will have greater resources than other in this area, so continuing to share our learning and also our offerings will likely be key to ensuring all our churches can develop in this area, if they so wish.

With 4.66 billion people online - 59.5 percent of the global population1– that is an enormous group of people that could be reached through online ministry. The apostle Paul made it his life's mission to go where the people are and to share the Gospel. The online space reduces the need for us to travel far and wide but to use the right tools and techniques to reach our different audiences.

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[1] Statista - https://www.statista.com/statistics/617136/digital-population-worldwide/#:~:text=How%20many%20people%20use%20the,the%20internet%20via%20mobile%20devices.

This document contains guidance on identifying

- Who is your community
- What are the priorities for you and your community
- What are the digital offerings that you could consider
    - Considering your Church community
    - Going where your wider community is

Who is your community?

Think about the community you have first and then consider the wider community that you would like to reach: -

- Who are they and what are their needs?
  - List all the different groups – new/exploring online, shielding, families, wanting fellowship in a building, choirs, elderly, long term congregation members, new members, occasional worshipers, digitally savvy, technophobes and generation z.
- When do they want interaction with the church?
- What would ideal worship look like for them?
  - Daily reflections, Sunday service, online services, podcasts, bible study groups, prayer groups, courses etc
- What sort of midweek activities would suit them, if any?
- What sort of Sunday activities would suit them?
- How we they like to be part of the church community?

You will have a community filled with all sorts of different people, some who really want the normality of pre-pandemic services, some who would prefer a virtual space to debate theology and drink tea, some who would value a space to bring their children and meet other parents but then also might enjoy a space online to share their journey throughout the week with other like-minded individuals.

So that is what they want but what as a Church do you want your different member of congregation, and wider community, to know, feel and do?

For example:

- You may want your community to know how they can access online services, or where and when to come to physical services. (Think keeping your website and social media up to date and visible)
- You may want your community to feel they are a part of the wider church community or indeed your church community are part of the wider community. (Consider joining local social media groups – the way you'd join local community groups in person)
- You may want those who are based in your community to feel welcome/to feel invited and to come to the services and engage with others. (What does welcome look like to each 'who' you have identified)

You can do these exercises multiple times with different people in your community.

A note on accessibility

Digital provision should be thought about in terms of what your community want and needs, but also with accessibility in mind.

What are the priorities for your church (online and in person) and your community?

You are not going to be able to do everything for everyone. What is most important to you, your church and your community.

For example, your key activities may be:
- Building prayerful confident disciples
- Discipleship of whole households
- Sunday services
- Midweek groups
- Courses or study groups
- Weekly community interaction
- Daily prayer meetings/Daily reflections
- Hiring out a hall
- Exploring faith courses
- Baptism/Confirmation courses
- Parent groups
- Being a voice in the local community on key issues
- Partnership with local schools
- Partnerships with local community groups

What can you double up on?
What should be done solely online or solely in person?

The answer to these questions will help you decide how you proceed and prioritise.

How you can support/resource digital and in person offerings?

Doing church differently will not be without challenge, make sure you are kind to yourself and while you want to be able to serve your whole community – **you are only human.**

Planning and community are key here; are there those who can support, lead, and nurture distinct parts of yourcommunity and work with you?
Do not shoulder this opportunity alone.

Think about your church leadership and wider community and the role they can each play withthose groups and activities that you have identified.

- Do you have members of your church who love digital – who would like to start voluntarily supporting the church explore this area?
- Has someone been leading your digital services and do they want to continue? Does this need to be the same team as those leading the physical ones?
- Can you share responsibility for all services with your leadership?
- Are there members of your church leadership who are vulnerable? Support for them and other options to fulfil the role/responsibilities will need to be considered.
- Are there members of your church who would love to learn about digital and take this opportunity to provide training and skilling up sessions?
- Use everyone's strengths. But also think about succession planning, if your video editor or Facebook wiz leave how will you continue to provide the service? Make sure you have access to everything and consider a password manager.

Consider the context

During lockdown, doing digital became the norm. Everyone was isolated in their own homes and there was at times, a captive audience. We know that people appreciated the individualized touch – filming from individuals houses and coming together each Sunday from one home to another. Bringing Church gathering into the mix will change this perception but that does not mean it needs to create a situation where church is right and watching online or from home is other.

As a team, this is the moment to take a pause and reflect:-

Is doing online Church the way you did during the pandemic right for the situation you are now in?

For some, who may have invested in technology, have enthusiastic tech teams and an enthusiastic audience online, then the answer may well be yes. The format may work, and everyone gets something out of it.

For others, you may have had to take Church online due to the pandemic but what should online ministry and Church look like? This might sound like semantics but for a lot of churches, the first step into the world of online ministry was to simply reproduce the elements of their in-person church service online. That means they stream their services, either live or for later viewing, from their website.

That is a fantastic way to begin, but one of the essential elements of any ministry endeavour is to remember your context. People do not consume content online the way they do in person. What might work as a live worship experience rarely lands the same way when streamed on a laptop. Be sure that your online offerings fit the shape of the format and the audience.

Do we need to consider now what people would like to see online (and it may not be the service) and what that ministry looks like? It might be a service or it might be a group, course, prayer. Below are some of the things you could consider

Some options to consider for your church and joining your wider community

Your front door or poster

Your Facebook page, Instagram and website all fit under this category. They are not where the meaty, messy, human community of your church happens, not should it be but they are the first chance for the wider community to see into the Church before they decide whether to remain online or set foot in person. It is your opportunity to show people what they could be part of, communicate important messages and share encouragement. It is a chance to speak not only to your church congregation but the wider community.

You would not post personal prayer requests with the owner's name on the front door or on a poster. Your outward facing Facebook page, Instagram and website are just as public and are seen by far more people than you would with your actual front door!

If you use A Church Near You or another website host, make sure your website is kept up to date, simple and that the important notices are front and centre. The Communication team can help you with simple guidance on websites or sign posting you to best practice.

Creating Groups for those already involved in Church

The easiest way to create an online space for all your Church community is by using Facebook groups. If your Facebook page is your front door then your Facebook group is inside the church. You need to make sure that your group is visible so when someone is on your page, they can see that this group exists and ask to join, or members can invite people to join, in the same way you find people come through the door of your church.


Groups have been created to be a place for community and so Facebook has tailored the platform to promote the activity in the group to the top of people's feeds, they do not even need to navigate to the group.

Groups are often seen as a safer space. People are more likely to share good news stories, prayerrequests and updates about their lives. Just remember that you play a part in keeping the space safe.

An example of a private group
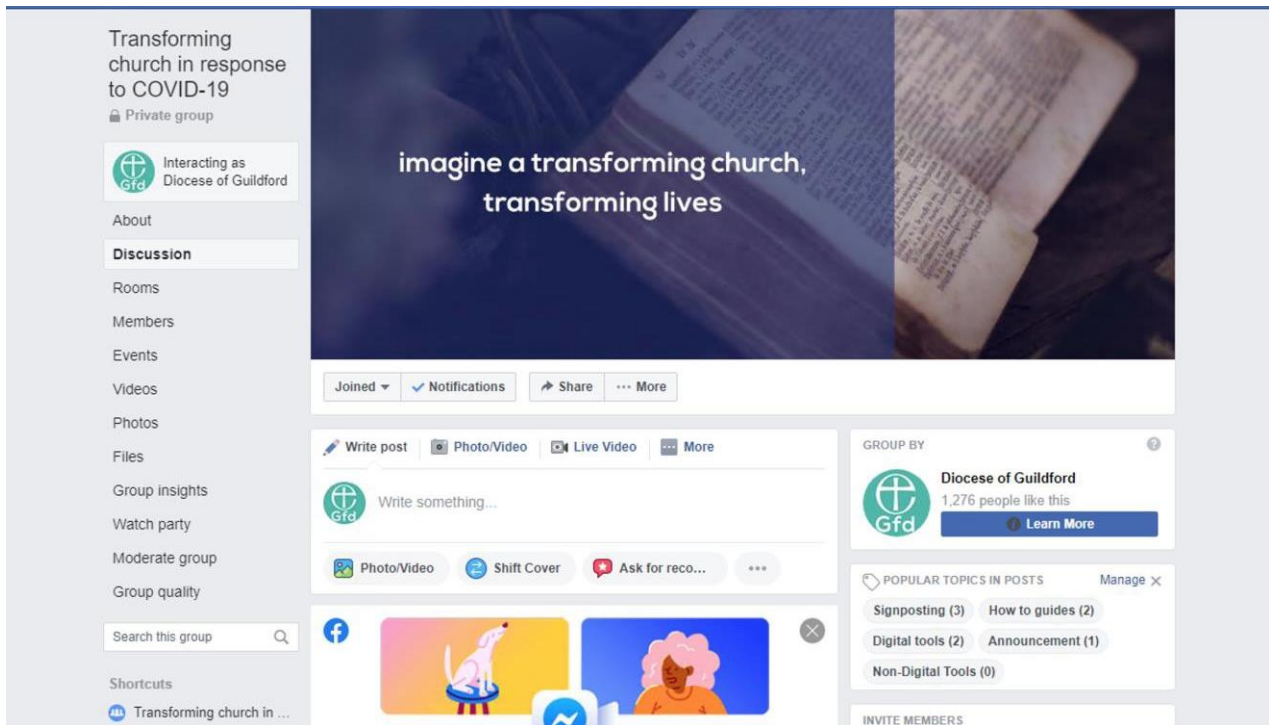
Top tips:

- Link your Facebook page and you or other admins can post on the group as the page.

- When someone asks to join the group, you can set it up so that they must answer some questions. This is both helpful in ensuring that you are admitting real people who want to be part of the community, and you can ask information that will help you disciple and steward them well. For example, you may ask how long they have been attending the church and how they answer will show you what kind of conversation will be helpful when you talk to them.
- Ask people to agree to group rules to be part of the group – this sets the tone and shows what you expect for a healthy and inclusive community culture.

Example of group rules

Group rules from the admins

1. **Be kind and courteous**
   We're all in this together. Let's treat everyone with respect. Healthy debates are natural and good, but kindness is required.

2. **No hate speech or bullying**
   Make sure everyone feels safe. Bullying of any kind isn't allowed, and degrading comments about things like race, religion, culture, sexual orientation, gender or identity will not be tolerated.

3. **No promotions or spam**
   Give more than you take to this group. Self-promotion, spam and irrelevant links aren't allowed.

4. **Respect everyone's privacy**
   This group is a safe space to ask questions, requires mutual trust. Authentic, expressive discussions is great, but may also be sensitive and private. What's shared in the group should stay in the group.

5. **Sensitive data**
   Please do not share any

6. **If you're unsure, ask**
   We can direct you to the right place or person to answer your questions.

- Ask other people to moderate the group. This means that they help with the process of admitting people to the group, ensuring that everyone adheres to the code of conduct and make people feel welcome.
- Unlike people who have liked your page, the people in your group will receive a notification for posts in the group. They are a group of people who are already engaged with the church and you are going to get much more engagement in a group than on a page.

There is a lot of functionality in Facebook groups and these continue to be developed. You can create events, add learning units, upload and share files and the brand new messenger for groups – where you can create a room to hang out with other members on the video instantly.

Other functionality

Sections

Social learning units
In this tab, you can make group resources easier to find and help people learn new things. Learn more
Add

Instant Games
Group members can discover games and send and receive invitations within the group.
Add

Jobs
Add ways to post and apply to jobs in your group.
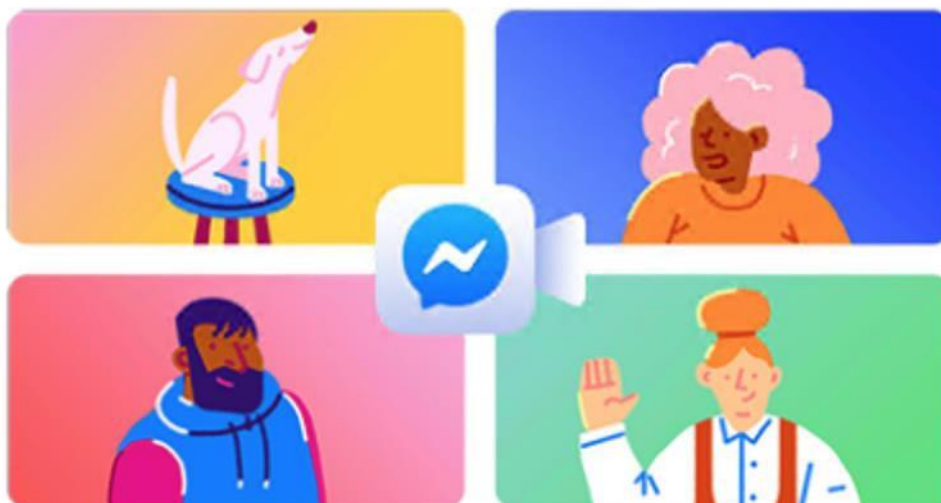Add

Watch party
Watch videos together and comment or react to them simultaneously with others in the group.
Remove

Rooms
Rooms let group members chat and connect over live video.
Manage

Introducing Messenger rooms for groups

Getting the group together has never been easier. Create a room to start hanging out with other members on video instantly.

Create Room

Learning Units is a fantastic tool that creates sequential, modular content that you can schedule for release within your group. **Imagine them as being perfect for an ongoing devotional or Bible study. They could even be used for running volunteer training or a new-to-faith course.**

Group Type	What it Does
General	This is the default group type and includes the standard set of tools.
Buy and Sell	This sets the default post type in the group to sales listings, allows you to set a default currency and gathers all sales listings in one place in the group.
Social Learning	This allows you to create quizzes and lessons and track members' progress.
Video Games	This allows you to link your group to a specific game and host tournaments for members.
Work	This lets you post shifts you'd like other people to cover and gives you the option of allowing other members to contact you without being friends.
Job	This shows a list of all open jobs and includes templates with job salary, location and hours.

There are a number of group types to choose from.

Have a play around. Join other groups, check out what other churches and organisations are doing.

Space for smaller groups

Whether you already have midweek groups or not you can create a space for smaller groups to be together outside of the Sunday experience. You might have a group for:

- all the small or midweek leaders
- each small or midweek group
- prayer
- a bible study
- coffee mornings
- social action

This list could really go on.

By creating more specific groups you can communicate specific information directly to the people in that group. You might want to share Bible study notes with your group leaders or eveninvite them to training.

By creating smaller groups you are facilitating closer connection. Specific groups also give your communities the space to talk about the things that matter to them with people who are likeminded or share a common purpose. They are more likely to talk openly with their close friends than their casual friends, and likewise more openly with their casual friends than with their acquaintances.
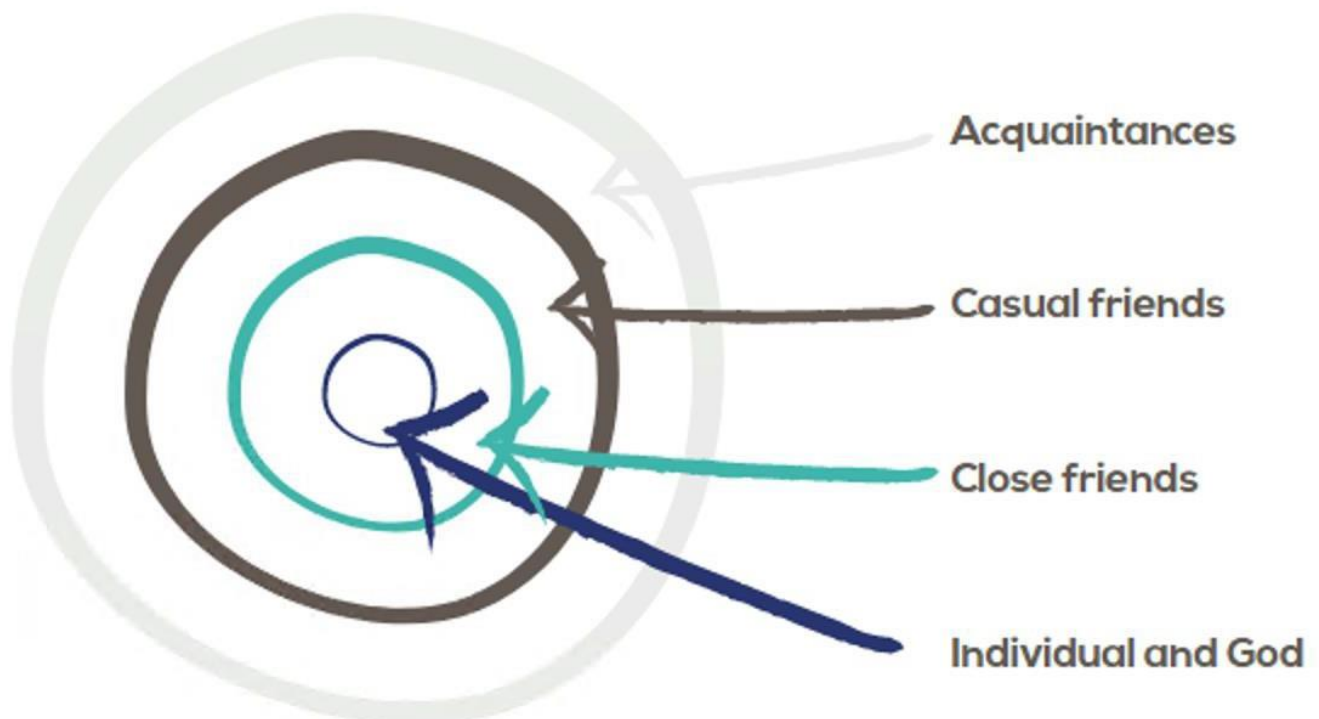
We would recommend that you **do not take responsibility for running each** of these, just as you would not run 20 or so bible studies, four coffee mornings, a toddler's group or two and various specific interest groups.

Find people who you trust to take ownership of these; they may be the people who ran them before lockdown and physical distancing or you may need to ask someone to come alongside who knows a bit more about technology.

Remember that this may be a long term thing, these online groups could continue in addition to the actual physical meeting. You need to **think about longevity**. For example, you may have a prayer group that meets every other week   but they may also want to share answers to prayer and request prayer at other times outside of that meeting as well.

There are a few different ways to create these smaller groups, and that may depend on the type of person that they include or what type of communication best suits the group. Before you go ahead and create lots of groups consider the purpose for each and choose a method that will best suit that purpose.

Where are your community? Go there.

It is not just facebook – consider other tools at your disposal

WhatsApp messaging groups

WhatsApp messaging is a little more tricky as there are GDPR implications with sharing a phone number. But the messaging is more instant than a group or a video call. Be clear on why you are using this tool, the ages of participants, consent and rules of engagement.

Zoom

We are all very used to Zoom and have seen it work well and be a massive flop. We can use Zoom to encourage people to gather rather than view.

- People can hang out on a Zoom call with their small groups while watching the Sunday message or after.
- There are lots of churches that push their congregations into smaller meeting rooms after the service to hang out, as we would when we have coffee at the end of a service in a church building.
- Midweek groups are happening on Zoom. And people who struggled to attend because of childcare, or other reasons, are now able to attend freely.
- Quizzes and other fun activities, and just about having fun.

Zoom allows your community to see each other face to face, which is a massive part of what we are missing out on at the moment. It will never quite replace it but it goes some way towards us feeling more connected,

Joining existing Groups to engage with the wider community

Its not just about engaging with the people you know but being a presence in the community in which you serve. This is the opportunity to share the news of Jesus Christ and to intentionally enter the space that is forming in the world around us. It is our chance to inform, educate, raise awareness, be part of the wider conversations and be like apostle Paul.

So how can you engage, participate in this space? Some ideas, you don't have to do them all….

- Join your local area's facebook group(s)

- Like and follow local community groups, local schools and other initiative important to the community

    - Why?
        - To form relationships
        - To share information they put out that is relevant to your community
        - To give a faith perspective as appropriate

Online worship and prayer

Church Services

There are three main ways you can consider combining digital into your church service offerings:
1. Live stream your in-person Sunday service to the digital community
2. Create a new digital Sunday service offering
3. Pre-record elements of your Sunday service that are streamed during the service

The choice you make will be based on a few considerations:
- Your community and what they need
- Your equipment and technical know how
- Your time

Daily prayers

A number of churches and cathedrals found sharing prayers very successful with their communities. There are a number of way to this.
- Posting a daily written reflection on your website
- Creating a designed reflection for social media
- Newsletter Mailings to congregations
- Short videos of either a daily reflection by a church leader or a prayer being read during a service used on social media
- Zoom meetings
- Open churches for particular prayer times

Other great examples of how you could engage with your community

A podcast

A blog

A telephone line – not everyone is digital and the digital divide grows bigger

Some principles to consider when setting up any of these online offerings:-

Be welcoming, be invitational

Keeping the conversation alive

Each community is different and will require various levels of input. There may be times of lotsof activity and times that are quieter. We would encourage you to try something new, to remember to show your face, to comment on posts, share your news, share short messages of hope, lead a prayer. There are lots of ways to both encourage the conversation and let people know you care and are aware they are there.

Walk alongside

And where you notice someone is a little more quiet than usual orthere may be something going on you can message them directly to offer hope and comfort. The same way you would in person move alongside someone to support them, you can do online.

Invite people to serve

People who had roles in the weekly church activities or those who hadn't found their calling yet – may all want to get involved. Create ways for people to serve, whether that's moderating a group, starting a new group, collating prayer requests, hosting a zoom chat or creating something to share with the wider church (such as a song, a poem or a graphic). You may end up with a bigger volunteer team and a greater array of expertise on offer to you and your church.

Try new things

It can be scary to try new things, and we see people get things wrong. But we always learn in theprocess. Create a safe space for yourself, find people you can try out new things with and check out what other churches and organisations are doing.

Keep showing up

Now is the time to keep showing up. People are spending a lot of time on their phones and computers. Make use of Facebook and Instagram Live and spread those messages of hope andinvite people to join the community. You can take the opportunity to better connect with our people at this time, create lifelines for those in need and enhance your ability to communicatewith your church as we look forward to the time when we can meet again physically.

Give people the chance to gather if they want to

Do not expect your online community to be your in-person community.

Resources

Self service

[**How to Guides and best practice ideas**](#)

[**Diocesan website**](#)

[**Church of England digital Labs**](#)

[**Training**](#)

More in-depth conversations and bespoke solutions

Communications team

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