

THE RISE OF THE ONLINE CHURCH DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Pete Phillips

PETE PHILLIPS, CENTRE FOR DIGITAL THEOLOGY, EXPLORES HOW THE ONLINE CHURCH IS GETTING DEEPER INTO GOD.

The church has been online for quite a while ... in pockets ... often as an avant-garde expression of the church on Second Life or Facebook groups like St Pixels or in the long-standing ministry of ichurch in the Oxford Diocese led by Pam Smith. Even more often, these have been expressions of those isolated from our physical buildings by impairment, disability, or persecution. 'Disability and Jesus' is such a movement focussed on people who are excluded from physical church and instead made their home online many years ago. Those of us joining the digital expressions of church through the pandemic enter a medium/place/space where others have already made their home. We need to be careful how we do this...

The church though has gone online with panache! From live-streamed services from their buildings, the church quickly diversified into online Agape services, FacebookLive and YouTube streamed live celebrations (sometimes with excellent blooper reels!), YouTube/FacebookLive video compilation services or pre-recorded services and even Zoom celebrations where families gather around a screen with other church members on gallery view and different hosts leading different parts of the service. Others have provided

phone and/or text-based services, with vicars mastering Twilio to arrange phone call links to YouTube or Zoom audio streams, or sermons as mp3s at the end of the line. Some have hand delivered service orders around their village. Some have celebrated kitchen-table eucharists - a fascinating reincarnation of the celebration of communion by non-conformists during the late Reformation (see Steve Holmes' amazing blogposts).

Of course, there are lots of issues around the church going online - especially in a fraught period for the nation as a whole. Some would argue that they should still have access to their church buildings; others would argue the church has always been about the people rather than the building. Angela Tilby has railed against the online church in the Church Times saying, among others, it is the privatisation of religion, the domestication of the church. Of course, the research has always told a different story. The digital church has always enabled and extended the local church. Tim Hutchings' research (Creating Online Church, 2017) showed that rather than decrease the number of people attending local expressions of church, digital church provided a safe place for people to see what church was about - a kind of shop window for the church. Often digital was seen as a supplementary form of church rather than a replacement. Churches all over have proven this in that when they talk to newcomers, they often find that they have been viewing online for weeks or months before darkening the physical doorstep!

The domestication of the church is also seen as a bad thing in some quarters while others remind us that the early church met in people's homes, in their flats in Rome, in courtyard houses in Palestine. We know this not just from texts but from archaeology - from the courtyard housing complex in Capernaum which was gradually overtime converted into a synagogue and then an octagonal church; from the house converted to a church in third century Dura Europus at the very extreme of the Roman Empire. It was not until the mass 'conversion' of society under Constantine that the public basilicas (a market/legal/business hub in most large towns) became the only obvious place to gather the whole population for worship. Of course, Jesus himself pointed towards the domestication of the church in changing the focus and place of worship from the Temple in Jerusalem to himself and to proclaim that where two or three are gathered in his name, he is there. It is simply theologically incorrect to say that the 'ekklesia' is a building. The 'ekklesia' has always been the gathered community (the 'synagogé') which often met in a building, any building, wherever they could. We need to resist the desire, post-lockdown, to make our buildings once again the embodiment of our church. We, the people, are the church.

Another issue is communion. The Methodist Church created its own form of liturgy for Spiritual Communion before the outbreak and one of the nationally supported livestreams is from



Wesley's Chapel in London providing regular celebrations of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper in which the ministers take bread and wine and viewers are required to say a prayer acknowledging that God's grace is available to us through Spiritual Communion when we cannot take bread and wine ourselves. For some in the Methodist Church as in the Anglican and Catholic Church, there is in this a separation of the presbyterally-ordained from the laity. Why is it that the laity are told to fast when the presbyters feast? Many presbyters have decided that they will join the laity in fasting as well. But then others have queried whether the idea of a Eucharist Fast is actually a thing at all - it is unheard of in the church and certainly not what fasting is about. You do not fast from God's grace or from the means of grace. In a time of deep concern and grief and confusion, my own view is that we should be encouraging our congregations to avail themselves as much as possible of the means of grace - including sharing in online communion as in the Methodist Church in Ireland and much of the USA and Northern Europe. I have explored this and other arguments in Bread and Wine Online (bit.ly/BreadandWineOnline)

We owe our ministers and church members and technical support staff a massive thank you. Not just those who have created masterpieces of online worship, but also those who have phoned around isolated people, who have staffed food banks, served as

chaplains in hospices, care homes and hospitals, offered prayer times online, or distributed notice sheets - anyone who has gone the second mile in seeking to maintain the church's mission during lockdown. An even greater thank you to those churches who have found ways of channelling the nation's grief for those lost, potentially 50,000 dead from the virus. How have we as a church mourned the dead? A church, I think in Blackpool, began tying black pieces of wool in the church garden for each person who has died. The community took over, replanting the garden and tying wool everywhere, more and more public reminders of the dead which often just become a number on the News broadcasts.

God is doing something during the COVID-19 crisis. The number of people viewing services online ticks up. The TearFund poll talks of 25% viewing online and more praying. Micro-research projects I have seen and encouraged prove the numbers have evidential truth. Some churches are 45% up, some 300% up, some 1000% up. By going online we have provided a shop window for a nation starved of community and human interaction. We must not whitewash the window when the church goes back into her buildings. But it is not just numbers. The church is getting deeper into God. Praying more, reading the Bible more, doing community more (yes, not less - have you set up Zoom coffee mornings yet?), reflecting more. This is a worldwide phenomenon which I have witnessed/

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discussed with ministers and pastors in China, Hong Kong, Australia, Singapore, Ukraine, Germany, Kenya, South Africa, Denmark, UK, USA, Canada... God is moving. God is taking his people closer to himself. God is pouring out his grace.

My colleague, Jonas Kurlberg, started asking a question at conferences a year or so ago - have you experienced God online? Responses were positive - usually 64-70% of people said they had. We can no longer ask this question as a research question. It is no longer important. So many people across the globe have experienced God online during the COVID-19 pandemic that who could deny that God has always been there pouring out his grace upon us all? The church has gone through a mini-revolution and many weary workers bear the wounds of sore eyes, headaches and frustration about how tech needs to be wrestled into the service of the church. But let us not forget that the digital supports the local, offers a safe place for people to see what we get up to in our closed church buildings. When we get back to celebrate communion, to hug our congregations, to share the peace, to meet locally, let us also do the digital. Let us have the best of both worlds where all might meet with the living God.

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