



THRIVING, NOT JUST SURVIVING, THROUGH COVID-19

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ALI JOHNSON, THE DIGITAL EVANGELIST AT CLIFF, HELPS US THINK ABOUT REACHING OUT DURING THE PANDEMIC.

Can you remember the world before Zoom, FaceTime, WhatsApp and the rest? COVID-19 has offered the church a great opportunity, but how do we not just do church online, but also reach people with Jesus' love?

A nationwide poll of 2,101 UK adults by Savanta ComRes for Christian relief & development agency Tearfund has some interesting insights into how people engage with church during the lockdown amongst the four nations.

Almost a quarter (24%) of UK adults say they have watched or listened to a religious service since lockdown.

The lockdown has seen an explosion in churches using online platforms like Facebook, Zoom and YouTube to hold their Sunday services, mid-week Bible studies, fun quiz nights or even prayer meetings - so much so that Facebook is introducing new features for live streams that are tailored to faith-based organisations.

Churches have always been trying to figure out how to reach more people, and it seems that this pandemic situation means the use of technology is one way of doing it.

One in twenty UK adults (5%) who say they have watched or listened to a religious service since lockdown have never gone to church.

I think that this figure would jump significantly if you include those who only go during Christmas or Easter services. I know from my own conversations with friends that they have explored church more as it has gone fully online under the UK's restrictions.

The survey also found that younger generations are engaging with more faith-based media than the over 55s:

A third (34%) of UK adults aged 18-34 say they have watched or listened to a religious service since lockdown (on the radio, live on TV, on demand or streamed online). This compares to one in five (19%) adults aged 55+.

There is also a gender skew as to who consumes more:

Men are significantly more likely than women to say they have watched or listened to a religious service since lockdown (on the radio, live on TV, on demand or streamed online) (28% vs. 21% respectively).

So what can the church learn from this?

Firstly, the church can change and adapt. I have never been so proud as seeing my timelines flooded with churches giving digital 'a go'. This mentality will be a

game changer for some of our churches. It will bring churches into a new mentality and new focus on reaching the lost.

Secondly, people are searching for hope. The lockdown for most people has been a rollercoaster of a journey and will continue to be for a period of time yet - with moments of great joy, fear, laughter and sadness. People need something deeply stable in times of uncertainty.

This research shows that online church is being consumed and is reaching those who had not engaged with faith before the lockdown or had engaged less before the lockdown. Church has been brought to the people.

The full survey focuses on the role of prayer during lockdown, with results on consuming online religious content a part of the results.

Nearly half of adults in the UK (44%) say they pray.

Over half of those who pray (56%) agree that prayer changes the world.

**Full report found here:*

tearfund.org/en/media/press_releases/many_brits_look_to_faith_during_lockdown/

My thoughts, however, are that we must not stop at just putting church services online but instead begin, in the time of easing of restrictions, to push forward with reaching into our communities in

both an online and offline way. Let us look at a roadmap of how to do that.

I want to suggest five key areas that can help in reaching out into your community.

1. MAKE CONTACT

Now more than ever before, our local businesses, schools and community groups need the church to step into the void that COVID-19 has left within our communities. We need to be the ones that reach out to them; Zoom them, create WhatsApp groups, call them, FaceTime them and use whatever means to connect with those who need our hope most. These people have never had their 'backs against a wall' more than they have now. For local businesses, we can offer to pray for them, buy gift cards, connect with them and others who are struggling and begin to build a sense of togetherness within our communities. A recent YouGov poll showed that 26% of Britons said they were happy, (this is down 24%), while stress has surged. ([yougov.co.uk/topics/health/articles-reports/2020/04/04/how-coronavirus-has-taken-its-toll-nations-mood](https://www.yougov.co.uk/topics/health/articles-reports/2020/04/04/how-coronavirus-has-taken-its-toll-nations-mood)). It all begins with reaching out and networking within the community that God has placed you in.

Community Facebook groups, WhatsApp groups and other community forums tend to be a key avenue into building relationship within our communities. Maybe it's time to reconnect with the gatekeepers within your community and find out where the church can offer support.

2. WHERE ARE ANSWERS?

It is clear that people are searching for answers to big questions during this time, but if someone goes on your website or Facebook page how will they find them? Will they just find information about you being shut or not doing live worship? Maybe it's time to shake things up and get back to basics. Alpha has seen a sharp increase in its online engagement. 'I've never known a time in my life when people are more open to [God's Word] than they are now,' said HTB's vicar, Nicky Gumbel, in an online Easter conference. 'There are no other distractions. There's no football, there's no sport. There's no entertainment. People have time to hear the gospel.' Indeed, never in modern history have so many people been sanctioned to their homes, in what the Dean of Gloucester Cathedral, Stephen Lake, calls 'an enforced period of reflection.' ([christiantoday.com/article/coronavirus-is-making-people-](https://www.christiantoday.com/article/coronavirus-is-making-people-)

[more-open-to-the-gospel-than-ever-nicky-gumbel](#))

Have a look at the 'digital' front door of churches and think carefully about whether they are able to be accessed by people who don't yet know Jesus. Be careful that our language is clear, our information is up-to-date and stories of transformation are front and centre. Most importantly make sure there are simple 'big questions' and gospel explanation.

3. GET TO THE STORIES

People are consuming online content like never before. Digital 2020 April Global Statshot Report ([slideshare.net/DataReportal/digital-2020-april-global-statshot-report-april-2020](https://www.slideshare.net/DataReportal/digital-2020-april-global-statshot-report-april-2020)) share some key headlines here:

- Big jumps in digital activity, especially in countries that have seen the strictest lockdowns
- Significant increases in social media use, with video calling taking centre stage
- Accelerating adoption of e-commerce, particularly for grocery shopping
- An increase in the amount of time spent playing video games and watching e-sports

These all point towards people wanting to engage with more of our content; most churches are seeing a huge percentage increase on all statistics in digital. One of the simplest and effective forms of connecting people with Jesus is for them to see and/or hear stories of transformation and God at work in people's lives.

One way we can tell stories is by interviewing some of those within our communities, both inside and outside the church. Maybe it is time to think about a weekly Zoom interview with a local councillor, a business leader, a school teacher, a family - and unpack some of the challenges of lockdown life. Let's tell some amazing stories and get them front and centre of our digital strategy.

4. THE IMAGINEERS

Disney timed its release of Disney+ very well to concede with the lockdown, didn't they? I was recently watching a documentary about the Imagineering department in the Disney family. The Imagineers, as they were fondly known, became central to the success of the Disney empire. They were tasked with dreaming up things that had never been

done before. I love the idea that within Disney there were some key individuals who were tasked within imagining a better future, not concerned with success or being right but instead given a free license to innovate, create and inspire a brighter, happier world.

Who are some Imagineers in your communities, people who need releasing to create and dream and try something brand new in a digital world? Maybe it's a podcast, a YouTube channel, a photography series or something no one has thought of yet. Let's release their creativity to run wild. Let's protect them but also try some new things because it's this that will bring life into our dry bones.

5. POWER TO THE PEOPLE

One of the bits of the lockdown that has been interesting is hearing from churches about those in the congregation that have been disempowered. Many members have gone from being at the centre of our churches to being on the side lines or so it can feel for many. We are about to embark on a mixed economy phase of the lockdown; how can we create better habits within our communities and release everyone to be an evangelist? It begins with a change of culture and simple techniques for us to create a church full of digital evangelists. Can we help people reach their streets or neighbourhoods, building on the amazing work that has been started?

COVID-19 has been one of the most life-changing events of our generation and things that our children and grandchildren will learn about. We can also use this as a time for the church to reconnect and connect with its community, to use the incredible new tools that God has given to us to reach others for him.

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