



**EVERYBODY
WELCOME
ONLINE**

**'AN ASTONISHINGLY
THOROUGH AND
PERCEPTIVE OVERVIEW
OF ONLINE CHURCH'
BISHOP PETE WILCOX**

BOB JACKSON AND GEORGE FISHER

WELCOME AND OVERVIEW

We are the authors of the church training course 'Everybody Welcome' (Church House Publishing), which helps churches invite, welcome and integrate newcomers, and so to grow. In our current situation much of this course is redundant.

We have a new challenge – how to contact, welcome, minister to and integrate the large numbers of people who seem to be accessing online church. Having our buildings closed down was a nasty shock. But those of us who have moved online have stumbled into a vast new mission and ministry world.

We have spent a frantic week contacting people to find out what is going on, sift out good practice, condense some wisdom, and lift our eyes for the bigger picture of what God seems to be doing.

If our findings are helpful or inspiring then please copy or refer them to as many of your contacts as possible. We would like them to go viral. We should not struggle on our own but learn from each other.

We'll update as we learn more – from you! So please email us your stories, wisdom, corrections and ideas so we can share them on our webpage.

We have five sections to offer:

- **Part 1:** What is going on and what is God doing?
- **Part 2:** Who is responding and why?
- **Part 3:** Welcoming well in the lockdown church
- **Part 4:** Welcoming the crowds when lockdown is over
- **Part 5:** Learning together

But we baby boomers are trying to learn foreign languages in order to communicate. We'd love to partner with one or two young native speakers – could that be you?

We've prepared these materials together but 'I' in the text refers to Bob, who has done most of the final writing.

The Ven Bob Jackson and The Rev George Fisher

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'This is an astonishingly thorough and perceptive overview of Online Church, given the speed at which it has been produced: accessible, practical and full of practical tips. It will give the novice the confidence to get started – but most "experts" will find new insights here too.'

Pete Wilcox, Bishop of Sheffield



Part 1

**WHAT IS
GOING ON AND
WHAT IS GOD
DOING?**

PART 1: WHAT IS GOING ON AND WHAT IS GOD DOING?

A Point in History

CUTTING EDGE COMMUNICATION

In the period of the Early Church the spread of the Gospel was enabled by the cutting edge technology of the day – the Roman road. In the providence of God this network of communication had been put into place just in time to enable Christians to travel the empire in speed and relative safety, spreading the news wherever they went. If Jesus had been born a few years earlier such rapid spread would not have been possible. The Early Church did not make use of their cutting edge technology entirely willingly. It took official steps to close them down to drive out the first Christians from their comfort zone, meeting with each other in the temple courts. Persecution propelled them in fear of their lives along the Roman roads to share the risen Christ with a pre-Christian world.

In the period of the Lockdown Church, the spread of the Gospel is being enabled by the cutting edge technology of the day – the internet. In the providence of God this network of communication has been put in place just in time to enable Christians electronically to travel the world in speed and relative safety. If the lockdown had happened just a few years earlier this rapid transition to an online church reaching the homes of the nation would simply not have been possible. The Lockdown Church is not making use of our cutting edge technology entirely willingly. It has taken official steps to close us down to drive us out of our comfort zone, meeting together in our church buildings. We have been propelled in fear of our lives along the internet highway to share the risen Christ with a post-Christian world.

Most of St Paul's roads had actually been there a few years before he walked them, but the early church also made use of the brand new codex technology – an innovative use of scrap notebooks to make sacred texts portable and shareable. Yes,

St Paul had pressed the 'share' button long before Silicon Valley.

When persecution lifted, the Early Church did not abandon the Roman roads, public city spaces and codex sharing, reverting to a secret sect. When lockdown lifts, we must not abandon the public spaces of the internet highway and share buttons to hide away again in Sunday secrecy. We have been sent out like St Paul to welcome the world to the kingdom of Christ through sharing the technology of the day. What an opportunity!

WE'VE BEEN PROPELLED INTO THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

Last month we were the Odeon, today we are Netflix. When I was young, the giant Odeon would show a film at 7.30 each night for a week or two. There was no choice of time, venue or film. If you wanted to see a film you had to turn up at 7.20pm, buy your popcorn and watch 'The Bridge on the River Kwai'.

In the 1950s the Odeon was okay. But then along came consumer choice, individualism and crowded, complex lifestyles. The big 'take it or leave' it screens started dying and multiplex arose, with its wide range of films and times. The surroundings were as comfortable as your own home. Then came TV film channels, and now Netflix, Prime and others, where you can watch whatever you want, whenever you want, wherever you are, on whatever you've got.

A few churches were ahead of the game – some have gone multiplex and a few have been trying Netflix – but typically, until last month, we were the 10.30am showing at St Odeon's. Inadvertently, by going online for other reasons, church moved from Odeon to Netflix in a couple of weeks. People can now choose their own time to take part in the church service, which church and service to access, and their own sofa rather than contracting back pain on a church pew. No wonder it's more popular. The Government has shut our 'Odeons' down, so in response we have stumbled into 'Homespun Netflix' and it's looking promising.



A Wonderful Discovery

Most churches going online have discovered that far more people are accessing their services than ever came to the building. What seemed initially to be a devastating blow to churches may actually generate growth.

God is a redeemer! Who knew?!



How Are Local Churches responding to lockdown?

Closing the churches took us by surprise. The alacrity of our response has been remarkable. Most churches have found ways of maintaining community connections, pastoral care and public worship. The Church of England, like other denominations, has traditionally counted the size of the church by physical attendance at church services. By this measure the C of E has ceased to exist. But church communities haven't shrunk – many seem to be growing in a new way. Church is people not buildings and our purpose hasn't changed – to worship God, to make disciples, to change the world. It's just the methods that have to adapt and we've discovered that we are more adaptable, and more appreciated, than we thought.

One archdeacon in the north of England wrote:

'Our clergy have been unbelievably wonderful in setting up at short notice their various acts of virtual worship. They are using Facebook, Zoom, Google Meet and YouTube for both live worship and pre-recorded stuff. This ranges from individual vicars doing things online to groups of churches and deaneries.'

Many churches and clergy who have taken to the public spaces of the internet to sustain their congregation find to their surprise that lots of other people appear to be joining in as well. Astonishing numbers of 'views' appear on our Facebook feeds and new or dimly remembered names appear in our

comments boxes, like-lists and friends requests. Others are pre-recording their services as this is less stressful and more open to added elements, then releasing them at the normal Sunday morning time. However, they are then finding that extra people access the service later, at a time to suit them.

Clergy livestreaming daily prayers or the daily office are finding far more people joining them that they used to. Others are finding daily devotional posts being much appreciated.

Although we are focussing on worship-events here, these connect with all other aspects of church life. For example, one church in the Forest of Dean has been online fundraising and supporting the local foodbank they helped set up. Many locals did not realise it was a church initiative, but they do now. Another church, as a notice in the online services, offers food parcels to those stuck at home.

All this is happening without any official plan or direction – this is a grass roots movement. And that leads us to suspect it is a movement of the Holy Spirit.

However, denominational and diocesan leaders have not been inactive either. The Bishop of Carlisle livestreamed a Good Friday message to which, by Easter Monday, 938 people out of the thousands who viewed had engaged by commenting, sharing or reacting. The Archbishop of Canterbury's Easter Sunday livestream on Facebook has received over two million views.

So what is going on? Are we really reaching so many more people? And, if so, what should we do about it? How do we welcome our new virtual friends? And what does this discovery mean for church life after lockdown?

Some of you will shudder at all the techno stuff and new skills we suggest are needed, especially if the last few weeks have left you exhausted. But you don't have to do all of it. Or indeed more than a bit of it this week. It is amazing what a difference even simple changes can make. So read this prayerfully and ask God how you should respond within your and your church's or churches' capabilities. Yes, you should be stretched but no, you should not be broken.

And while we may see the mission opportunities, many of us are also grieving for what we have lost. We fear for some of our congregation. Will the less well-established lose touch and never be seen again? Will the older people be afraid of catching the virus after lock-down and stay away? A friend of mine from church is now on the palliative care route in his nursing home, bereft of his family, friends and rector. Many clergy are conducting desperate funerals without congregations.

Our attempt to help you with online mission is not a clarion call to over-activism, it's a resource to help you use your time effectively, to share lessons learnt, and to gather a team to share the load.

Does our upbeat tone surprise you? Our optimism is founded on God being a redeemer. He takes what is truly dreadful and makes good to come out of it. One of his redemptions is through the new connections and opportunities emergency online church is starting to bring alongside all the tragedy. Be encouraged.

Are Online Congregations Really Bigger?

We suspect they are. A lot bigger. This is what is so exciting.

But defining and logging 'attendance' at an online event is not easy!

Some comments and stories:

- Have had a huge number of hits, many more than the number of people in church on a Sunday. Connecting with people who would not come to a regular service. Comments such as, 'I'm not religious but that's fantastic', and 'see you on Sunday' (from non-church folk).
- Our online services on our YouTube channel, through Facebook, through our website, have doubled/nearly tripled Sunday morning numbers, about 200+ viewing for us. We will be looking at doing Live Sunday services in the future, and will get some internet into the Church building.
- Services have been really interesting – 250 people watching live, 1400 people watching a significant amount of the service in a week. 2500 people having a quick peek!

- Rediscover Church in Exeter has been broadcasting its morning service online for some time. The online part of the congregation tends to be around 100-150 people, and this includes some people who have never been to a church before. The church reasoned that many people today live their lives on the internet so that an online service is natural to them. But entering a church building is somewhat scary. The church has 'online pastors' to welcome online viewers and make them feel connected. They find that 80% of their newcomers had been watching online before they came in person. The online offering is not simply an alternative to personal attendance – it is the route in to personal attendance (with thanks to 'Christianity Today' April 2020)

- Here at Beacon Lough Baptist Church in Gateshead we have only 39 members but we started livestreaming our services six months ago and got about 200 views each week, rising to 300 the Sunday before lockdown. Now we pre-record our services on Facebook. The minister films his part with a video camera and drops a memory stick in my letterbox. Other people taking part (musicians, person with a four minute testimony) do the same and I do the links and put it together. It lasts about 45 minutes. I then upload it on to Facebook and YouTube on Saturday evening for it to go live at 10am Sunday. In the run up to Easter we advertised two of our three services to all 8400 Facebook users within 1km of our building. The advert cost us £5. We had 1300 views of each service. The 'control group' service we didn't advertise got the usual 300. We ask all church members to share the online service on their feeds – to like and share to build



audience. We are getting a lot of feedback that people who were only loosely connected are watching and appreciating it. When lockdown began I started a Whatsapp group for all 48 houses in our street. Half the neighbours now seem to be accessing the service. Our minister is a Reservist Army Chaplain. When he goes in now the troops all ask him about the service as lots of them seem to be watching it. The most important element in the service is sharing stories, testimony. That's what makes the most impact.

- We were amazed at the number of views we're getting, comments and likes from people I've never met. Our average Sunday attendance is 128. Church membership is approximately twice that, including faithful weekly attendees and those who come less often from the fringe, but are regular nevertheless. However our first Sunday morning livestream reached 647 with 203 engagements. Palm Sunday reached 951 with 259 engagements. I appreciate that some of these will be people dipping in but it's still significant.
- Here's a post from someone who responded after the first week.

'I love this and the singing. I work at the hospital for NHS and I'm not able to attend church as often as I would like to as I have to work every weekend, unless I book holiday. Therefore I'm overwhelmed I can listen to services on here. I do try to attend evening services whenever I can as this church is where I did Sunday school as a little girl and has been my family church all my life for services also our family funerals and weddings. This is the only church I have ever attended and want to attend, therefore I'm so grateful to be able to listen to the services.'

We've already commented that we are going to have to give serious consideration to livestreaming our worship once we get back to normal, whatever normal will look like in the future.

- I am writing this at 8.30am on Easter Monday. My own village church had two livestreamed services on the website Facebook page yesterday – a Messy Style at 9am and a more traditional service at 11am. The Messy-style was backed up by videos and posts largely created by the families themselves. Normally between 25 and 30 households totalling around 70 people come to the 9am service. The livestreaming was reportedly followed by 43 devices, probably representing around 100 individuals, being aimed at families. The number of church families taking part looked about average but new people revealed themselves through comments and likes. My best estimate is that the real-time 'Messy at Home' congregation was about 40% bigger than normal because of the new people. We think that several other families accessed the service and activities later.

The 11am service had 73 devices. Being aimed at adults, people will have been watching in their ones and twos so the total number of individuals was probably around 110-120. This is roughly what we might have expected in church yet we know from the comments and likes that the total includes quite a few fringe and new people. I got a lovely email from a couple in Canada who watched it. So it is clear that some of our regular congregation were not connected, perhaps because they did not have the facilities at home. Some of our older and non-tech people were therefore unable to take part – a problem that did not affect the families at 9am, all of whom were tech-savvy enough.

Some neighbouring village churches are not trying virtual services at all because most of their congregations are simply not equipped to receive them at home. Clearly we should not be so dazzled by the big 'views' figures that we become blind to those who are missing out completely. We have not found a replacement for meeting-together services, we have found an adjunct. We are not looking at an either-or future but at a both-and world.

- I found your 'Everybody Welcome' material really useful and we used it as part of our strategy, through which the church has grown considerably. We set up a Google Site for our online services. You can watch it at any time of day and numbers of logins suggest that more folk are accessing worship this way than actually attend on Sundays. We'll plan to livestream our church services online once this is over.
- A vicar in Suffolk is livestreaming his daily morning and evening prayer via the church website Facebook page. The number of people joining him has at least quadrupled and he never now says it on his own. A shortened form of daily prayer has been distributed via the parish magazine and a few people are saying it together over the phone. On his daily walk round the village he finds people more ready to talk than they used to be, and some are admitting to tuning in to the church services.
- A vicar in Sheffield podcasts daily Morning Prayer with his wife from their breakfast table with a five minute reflection. Six used to join him for this in church but now the website gets over 100 page views of this a day.

We'd love to hear your online story – do send us a summary if you have something helpful or encouraging to share with others.



Sparing you the details of how I did it, below is my careful estimate of the number of people who pretty fully accessed the online services at my (Bob's) own church the last three weeks. Most accessed at the appointed time, plus a few later. 2019 was of course a count of physical attendees, 2020 an estimate of online attendees:

Attendance at St Lawrence Eyam

	2019	2020	% Change
Palm Sunday	156	230	47%
Easter Sunday	221	310	40%
Low Sunday	98	150	53%

Are Online Visitors Really All Part of the Church?

Maybe some of them are just watching church out of boredom. More likely is some sort of felt need for community or yearning for God. We could have a fine ecclesiological debate about the boundaries of a church community, but most of us are used to them being vague, porous, open to the world. Here we are assuming that online joiners are all potentially journeying to join the Christian community. We do not want to judge motives or faith levels but we do want to echo God's giant cry of welcome to all who stumble towards him. For most people, it is belonging to the church that leads to believing in Jesus that leads to behaving as Christians. Those who find a warm welcome into the community of Jesus will soon meet its head.

Interpreting 'Views' Figures

Some people have been bowled over by Facebook 'Views' figures, others say they are meaningless. We think they mean something, but not too much. Facebook includes as a 'view' all devices clicked on to the video for at least three seconds. A Facebook 'administrator' can find 'analytics' and click 'insights' and 'view more insights' to find data on live participants and subsequent views. This number can look huge, but for my church 56% of people gave up before 10 seconds and 82% before one minute. Only maybe 20-40 out of 900 watched most of the Easter Sunday service, though that in itself is a significant number and even the short-view crowd have at least come across us.

The problems are:

- Facebookers typically never watch anything for longer than five minutes, then usually with the sound turned off, and almost always on a phone. A 45 minute service is not in the Facebook culture. Long-form video is dominated by YouTube, Facebook only have a 1.2% market share.
- To catch and hold new people the opening seconds are critical. Facebook streamed services tend to begin with a tedious ten minutes of welcoming Fred and Mable who announce their arrival with a message. People do not patiently plough through all that to get to the meat of the service.
- You can't edit it later – what went out stays on!

I think I've cracked a method of estimating the number who do access the bulk of the service by viewing later on Facebook and you'll find that on our webpage.



So Facebook is okay serving the live congregation – we get almost no drop off in our live congregation numbers. But it's not good for adding serious extras during the week. This is a large new potential mission field and you need the tool for the job – YouTube. But make sure your video welcomes and grabs people instantly it starts.

You can buy an advert on Facebook (they will advertise this service to you if you are an 'administrator'). They call it 'boost a post'. Silly name but it's cheap, and when the advert period is over they will send you, for free, helpful profiles of the people who saw the advert. These include, for example, age profile and gender split. You can restrict the area of advert to Facebook users in your own patch. You can advertise a YouTube link but only do it if you have a video that grabs instant attention.

YouTube: On YouTube Analytics you can discover how many viewers were watching you stream throughout your video. You can also find out how many messages were sent by viewers in your live chat.

Views figures clearly include large numbers of transient dippers-in. But that is no reason for dismissing them as worthless. A proportion will always stay the course and even the transient may stay longer next time. The few genuine viewers in the massive 'views' figures are the equivalent of the new person coming in through the church door or the returnee you haven't seen for five years. The Holy Spirit will certainly be at work touching their lives with love and grace through our online offerings. The stories and the data we have assembled together even at this early stage of online church tell us that genuine online congregations tend indeed to be significantly bigger than in the building.

