

# THE ONLINE CHURCH SURVIVAL GUIDE

## Making the most of being online

Updated 13 May 2020

We can't go back to the way we were before.

Our experience of COVID 19 has changed us forever. The entire globe has been shaken by the effects of this unseen virus. We've all had to adapt, accept restrictions and losses, learn new skills and face a new reality that will affect all our lives, including the way we are the Church.

### **Church online is here to stay**

At Level 2 we can initially only gather in groups of 10 or under. At this time online engagement will still be an important tool to communicate with our church members. Looking to the rest of 2020 and into 2021, it is highly unlikely that all our congregations will be able to meet in person to worship as we did pre-Covid-19. Those who live with or are themselves immune suppressed are likely to steer clear of any gatherings until a vaccine is available, and others may feel it is an unnecessary risk. This means that if our churches want to faithfully engage all of their congregation, they will need to straddle both physical and online engagement.

### **What did we learn from the past six weeks of being an online church?**

Although our experiences and capabilities of being the church online are diverse there are some common themes to pay attention to:

- **Relationship trumps content and programmes every time.** Our people now have the ability to visit any church they want at the click of a button. This can raise feelings of inadequacy for us if we think that other churches have a more polished online offering than us. Many are enjoying the variety of content they can access, however research encourages us that the strongest desire is for meaningful personal connection. This means that they want to hear and learn from someone they know.
- **We've moved from being spectators to collaborators.** Being the church online has opened the door to new opportunities for a collaborative approach to worship, discipleship and mission. For example, church worship services on interactive platforms like Facebook Live enable those who usually spectate in silence the opportunity to comment, question, pray and encourage in real time. The internet has exploded with amateur videos and blogs by people wanting their experiences and ideas to contribute in some way to the global community.
- **Interacting online enabled some us to connect with new people in new ways**  
Similarly, online spaces have proven less risky for some on the fringes of our churches to engage without having to go through the entire culture-shock of fronting up to one of our in-

person offerings. For this reason alone we hope that churches will continue to explore how they can engage their community online

- **Not everyone has access to the internet or a device**

Some of our congregations and communities will need assistance with getting online. Parishes might consider creating a fund to help pay for simple devices and data plans. One economical way to connect someone who has neither a device nor broadband at home is to buy a simple Android phone with a prepay data pack from a carrier like Warehouse Mobile or Skinny.

Fortunately, we now live in world full of different ways to connect with each other. In this document we will explore some of the options for us to connect without being physically present.

## Sunday morning worship

For many of us, when we think of church, we think of Sunday morning worship. So, if we can no longer gather, or some of our members cannot gather with us, what are our options?

1. We could encourage people to watch another church service either on TV or online, or encourage people to do personal devotions.
2. Mail or email a written service with prayers and sermon along with the church bulletin.
3. Record an audio of a minister leading a worship service (including prayers and sermon). Other individuals could contribute to this from their homes.
4. Film the minister leading a worship service and upload it to YouTube or Facebook.
5. Stream live from your laptop/phone using a service like Facebook live or Zoom webinar. This potentially gives your congregation the opportunity to interact and collaborate rather than just spectate in worship. More info on how to use Zoom and Facebook below.
6. Stream live events where you are mixing sound and video feeds on the fly (some software suggestions if you are keen to give this a go - PC: <https://www.vmix.com/> Mac: <https://www.ecamm.com/mac/ecammlive/>).
7. Under the current Level 2 guidelines house gatherings of no more than 10 people are permitted if approved by the parish council. Members of a church could gather in small groups in their homes if they chose to and could participate in a worship service, training or fellowship with other small groups meeting in other homes connected through an online platform such as Zoom.

### Technical requirements

Whether you are recording or live streaming you will need one of the following setups

1. Most simple is phone or laptop, using a built-in camera and microphone
2. Plug a microphone into laptop or phone to get better audio ([watch](#))
3. Use a video camera and plug sound from sound desk into laptop ([watch](#))

### Zoom – our most used online platform. <https://zoom.us/>

The story of Zoom over the past 6 weeks is a great example of the rapidly changing landscape we are living in. At the commencement of lockdown, Zoom was the international crowd favourite with many people using the videoconferencing service to take their first baby steps into the online

meeting foray. A few weeks later after users experienced such un-pleasantries as “Zoom booming” and people stealing files from their personal computers, Zoom rapidly became as repelling as someone coughing in public; many users chose to “social distance” this online video conferencing service.

Zoom subsequently knuckled down to clean up its act and has certainly learned to cough into its elbow. Now with significant security updates, Zoom has earned back the confidence of many tech savvy pundits. For this reason we wholeheartedly recommend Zoom as the most widely used online videoconferencing service.

- Zoom is telephone friendly. Those who want to steer clear of digital devices can still use the trusty dog and bone and call a local telephone number and still participate in the Zoom conference.
- Zoom can cope with large and small numbers reasonably well. The free account can handle up to 100 participants for up to 40 minutes. For US\$15-20 per month you can meet for longer and have more participants.

Here are some links to tutorials to help you get the most out of Zoom:

A two- page guide for setting up a live stream Zoom service <https://bit.ly/2QvLWzu>

You can visit Zoom’s training resource page for video and text tutorials <https://zoom.us/docs/en-us/covid19.html#training-resources>

### **Facebook Live**

Using Facebook capitalises on the fact that many of our congregation are already using the Facebook platform. Many of our churches have Facebook pages on which our members already see posts and messages. Facebook is also great for promoting comments and collaboration.

Here is a link to one of the many very helpful tutorials on how to use Facebook live <https://www.wowza.com/blog/facebook-live-for-churches>

### **What works well (and doesn’t work well) with digital services**

Using online technologies don’t work well for singing, following liturgy together, passing the peace, taking communion or passing the collection plate!

But there are other opportunities... for example, using online chat conversations alongside the video allows people to discuss the sermon in real time, and it allows people to share prayer requests (and critique what the preacher is saying!).

If you are opting to do a live stream or live recording, be prepared and have your content ready to go, but when you present don’t rush, and consider using a script. Body language is important, we suggest you lean forward and look at the camera directly.

A final thought on Sunday worship. In a time of isolation, you are not limited to leading worship just on a Sunday, you may want to consider leading a short daily live devotion.

## Meetings, small groups or Bible study

The heartbeat of many congregations are the small groups in which people connect - whether that is a Bible study, youth group, parish council, or any of the various committee meetings.

So, what tools can we use to engage in these situations?

1. The phone. Setup a conference call to host a meeting. Many cell phones have the feature of being able to include up to 5 people. Here are instructions for iPhones <https://www.dummies.com/consumer-electronics/smartphones/iphone/how-to-make-a-conference-call-on-your-iphone/>  
And for Android phones <https://www.dummies.com/consumer-electronics/smartphones/droid/how-to-make-a-conference-call-on-an-android-phone/>
2. Online software such as Skype, Zoom, Google Hangouts or Messenger

**Hospitality** is always important when we gather. In an online environment we need to think carefully about this, communicating by email/social media beforehand with participants; ensuring the chair of the meeting is greeting people as they join; engaging in conversation; telling jokes; or having an icebreaker conversation. These are all important tools to avoid awkward silent time.

**Preparation.** The Chair of the meeting needs to well prepared. It is advisable to test your audio beforehand and to start on time. Because participants can't have side conversations, the gathering needs to be engaging for the whole time. Such meetings can be more intense and more tiring. We recommend you do meetings no longer than one hour. Hosts also need to know participants can be more open and more vulnerable in online conversations.

**Quality discussion.** If you are doing your meeting using online software, we recommend all participants use their webcam and are in a quiet environment. Online conversations are always better where participants have a good internet connection. Plugging in directly to a modem with an ethernet cable is best. Using mobile data or public wifi will provide the worst connectivity, and home wifi will be somewhere in the middle for most homes.

## Fellowship

Proactive members of our congregations who are friends won't need any help with connecting with each other, they will just pick up a phone and chat.

However, for people living by themselves, you may need to encourage them to connect. Suggest that they call someone each time they stop for a coffee, so they don't get too lonely.

We should also consider many of our congregations only talk to each other at church activities. Bearing this in mind, what can you do to help facilitate fellowship in your context? Perhaps now is the time to:

- Set up a number of online social media groups, in which people in your congregation interact throughout the week.
- Speak to a telecommunication company to set up a conference call feature, where you invite a few elderly people to call in for a group conversation.

## **Pastoral care**

Isolation can be a very challenging experience for all people. In our current context, more and more people in our congregations will be isolated physically, especially the elderly.

While elders, ministers and pastoral care workers may not be able to meet physically with people who are isolated, it is critical that we are intentional about making frequent contact.

Prayer and Scripture are the foundations of resilience. When having conversations with people who are isolated, ensure you pray, read Scripture and have a faith conversation. Remind them that what they feel is normal and with God's help, there is nothing to fear.

Encourage them to keep their usual routine, mealtimes, bedtimes and exercise etc. Where it is practical, urge them reach out to family and friends.

## **Communicate**

Develop a plan about what your church will do to stay connected if you can't physically meet.

Communicate the plan to everyone. We suggest that church leaders advise their congregations how they can expect to engage in the ministries of the church if you are not able to gather.