

# Moving the Church Online

In the light of the government lockdown, we looked for new ways for church to meet and communicate online. We started a church-wide WhatsApp group and subscribed to Zoom, the online video-conferencing tool. Like many churches, it feels as if we have been grappling with theology and technology ever since! But here are some practical reflections after five Sundays of meeting online.

## Zoom

Zoom is a really competent tool. It can handle large gatherings, accessed from a range of devices: from smartphones and PCs to the 'old-fashioned' landline. You can choose to see a gallery of faces or allow Zoom to highlight the person who is speaking. The host can share their screen: to show PowerPoint, to stream videos or songs for example. (Other popular software tools with similar features include Cisco Webex and Microsoft Teams – Ed.)

## Some Practical Observations

*An up-to-date list of members and contacts is a wonderful thing.* In theory we have a database of church members, adherents and contacts. In practice, it took us three days to make sure it was up to date with mobile numbers and email addresses – which is a prerequisite to getting people connected.

*It gets better with practice.* We ran a number of trial sessions ahead of the first service to give people time to practise logging in. It meant that church members of all ages accessed the services from the start.

*Groups dynamics still apply.* You will know from other meetings that some of your members say nothing and others struggle to stop. On balance, people are probably more reticent to speak online; but some still like to hog the floor. You need to think how you are going to handle them. Which leads on to...

*The mute button is a great invention* (and a pain). Have you ever wanted to run a youth meeting where you could mute certain individuals – or the whole group? You can now! Participants in a Zoom meeting can 'mute' themselves to avoid distracting others with background sounds or a fit of coughing. It is a useful function, until you plough on with your sermon having forgotten to unmute yourself. The host can also mute participants – either temporarily or permanently. We unmute everyone at the beginning and end so that they can meet and greet. We mute everyone when the host needs attention, when everyone is singing or during preaching. We ask people to unmute themselves for open prayer and then mute again. But announce what you are about to do to avoid embarrassment.

*Co-hosts are helpful.* We usually make one or two people cohosts to the meeting. They act as spotters – muting people who have the TV on in the background, unmuting people who can't work out how to unmute themselves. It allows the host to get on with running the meeting. A couple of people can be appointed as telephone helpers to aid strugglers with logging in.

*Choose your voice to fit the meeting.* As pastors you will have a voice to fit each occasion: your preaching voice for Sundays; your small group voice; your one-to-one voice. Your congregation are now joining you from their front room: think about whether you will host from home or from church, and about which "voice" makes most sense.

*Remember how to delegate.* In the early days of lockdown, it seemed like the onus was on me as pastor to get things up and running online. I have had to remember how to delegate: songs to the music group leader, kids' activities to the Sunday Club leaders as before. The elders have been taking it in turns to provide online morning devotions on a weekday.

*Limit your time with the technology.* Some of us are closet tech geeks. Don't try to perfect that art of online presentation: continue to think theologically and pastorally as you would do normally.

## WhatsApp

In comparison, setting up a church-wide WhatsApp group is child's play. But, after a week of experiencing the torrent of posts a medium-sized church can produce, a number of people left feeling overwhelmed. We created a second group to which only the administrators post items – notices, links to services, items for prayer and so on.

## What are we trying to do?

It was instinctive to find a solution where the church could continue to meet together in some format – an online meeting rather than a live stream. It seems that our church members share that instinct: our attendance is probably above normal levels. But is this really a church service? And, practically, does it work? The answer, I think, is that this a substitute for the church meeting together. Few of the elements work as they should.

- ✚ We cannot sing corporately; it just doesn't work. But we can praise God to the same song at the same time.
- ✚ We cannot meet around the Lord's table: we can neither come together nor eat together (1 Corinthians 11:17-22). But I wouldn't condemn those who do.
- ✚ We cannot hold a members' meeting: the authority of Christ is with the church meeting together (Matthew 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 5:4). But we may yet have to accept an online meeting as a substitute.
- ✚ We can preach. But the church doesn't come under the Bible corporately, as they would normally.
- ✚ With care, we can pray together.

## Will we carry on when the lockdown ends?

By the time the lockdown ends, the church at large will be much more tech-savvy. For us, there are a handful of people who are genuinely housebound, for whom online services make better provision than they had before. We will look at providing some aspects of our Sunday service live online.

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