

Church online - the question we should all be asking...

Many of us did not have much time to reflect on what we were doing and why. As restrictions begin to lift now is a good time to do that reflection and ask the question 'what do people need from churches right now?' – then consider how best we can use technology to meet those needs. By Rob Beamish



As the months have gone by it has become harder for me to remember the pre-lockdown world, where zooming was reserved for spaceships, and meeting people in the flesh did not require a two-metre stick to ensure safe distancing; but if you can, cast your mind back with me to March. The then inevitable announcement of lockdown led to a 'Le-Mans' type start as churches dashed, with scant warning and little time for preparation, to develop online resources and services. In the midst of all the chaos it felt like there were some who had already been sitting in their cars ready with the engines ticking, but for most of us it has been quite a ride. Whether that journey for you has been a smooth one, or if it has been marked by bumps in the road and numerous wrong turns, the intention here is to begin to reflect on where we have been, and to see how that helps us work out the way ahead.

Early on in lockdown I had the idea of conducting a study of how Baptist churches and leaders were responding to the crisis, and in particular what that meant for our preaching. Many responded to my request to look at their material, and I have been blown away by their generosity, courage and creativity. It takes real courage to try something new when patterns have been long established, and also to be creative online when you are not a natural 'digital native!'

However, as I have browsed through websites, watched live-streams and read newsletters, I have seen again and again that Baptist leaders have explored all manner of possible avenues in order that church communities could continue to be relational, and that the good news of Jesus was proclaimed.

In the midst of all the loss and turmoil we have been experiencing, that is something worth celebrating.

Significantly, it is the evident willingness of churches to embrace different models and methods that has caused excitement as we continue to reflect on what it is to be a church fit for purpose in our digital age. Many had thought that it was all too late for such change to take place, but in the midst of all the backslapping we need to pause for a moment and take a breath. The digital-theologian Heidi Campbell, after the first weeks of lockdown, commented that the focus of discussion is often on the more pragmatic concerns of doing church online, and how we have modified aspects of our services and practices to the new environment. However, she claimed that the really important question is in fact 'what do people need from churches right now?', quickly followed by, 'and how might digital technology be used to meet those needs?' (Campbell, ed 2020, p49)¹

Her questions may appear obvious, but they are profound. It can be easy to buy into the idea that the church has been resistant over the years to new technology, or even conversely claim that we have allowed it to shape our activities. Campbell has previously challenged the idea that we should accept wholesale the claim that technology negatively shapes religion. She has shown that different religious groups have shaped and used technology, 'bringing their theological traditions to bear on how they use them.' (Campbell, 2010, p40)²

Whether it is the use of websites to target groups previously beyond reach, or the adaptation of technology to suit religious practice, it would be wrong to argue that we are simply enslaved to the latest technology. It is this willingness to adapt new technology which has actually marked religious engagement with technology in the main. For Campbell this is the 'religious social-shaping of technology' which comprises four distinct stages, 'religious communities reflect upon their history of media use, consider their core values and practices, evaluate the technology and negotiate its redesign and finally frame the technology through a group discourse that sets appropriate goals and boundaries for its use.' (Campbell, 2010)² This is a useful observation, and whilst different groups will be at different stages, it is safe to say that for many of us we did not have much time to reflect on what we were doing and why, we just got on with it because we needed to do something. As restrictions begin to lift now is a good time to do that reflection and ask the question of 'what do people need from churches right now?'; and to consider how best we can use technology to meet those needs.

Tim Hutchings, another digital-theologian, has observed that in 'over 35 years online churches have been driven by three common ambitions, the desire to amplify, to connect and to experiment.' (Campbell, ed 2020, p61)¹

1 Campbell, Heidi. Editor: *The Distanced Church, Reflections on Doing Church Online*, Digital Religion Publications, 2020

2 Campbell, Heidi: *When Religion Meets New Media*, Routledge, 2010



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Whether being online has been driven by an individual's desire to get a certain message across, or the simple hope of a church to reach outside of its walls, the internet has been a place of both connection and experimentation.

Taking this further Campbell has identified six communication traits for online religious settings which all revolve around this idea of connection as people look for:

- 1 relationship
- 2 care
- 3 value
- 4 connection
- 5 a safe place
- 6 fellowship with like-minded individuals.

(Campbell, ed 2020, p50)¹

This emphasis on connection in the digital world reflects the same desires as in the physical one, meaning that it is not about us having to choose one or the other to be effective, it will always now be about a blending of the two. Lockdown has forced many of us to be courageous and creative in ways we never expected, so let us reflect on where we have been, and then continue to seek ways to connect with each other and God in the days ahead.

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For further reflection:

- » What do people need from your church right now?
- » What is the good news of the gospel in a time of global pandemic?
- » How might you continue to use technology to proclaim to meet those needs and to proclaim that good news?
- » How might the developments in your use of technology continue to benefit those with additional needs both in your church and community? (Consider here the housebound and those who find it difficult to engage with and access traditional forms of worship.)