

Sally Hitchener - Churches should carry on embracing online worship

(From last Saturday's Times)

Churches across the UK have taken their activities online during the pandemic. In my church, St Martin-in-the-Fields in Trafalgar Square, you can join us online to participate in our worship services, small groups, concerts and even a once a week drop in to chat with a vicar via zoom — bring your own tea. We're not alone. Churches and cathedrals throughout the world have taken their services and community life to the internet and have discovered people joining them who have never set foot in their buildings. And now, as the flood waters subside (hopefully) and churches have the option of getting back to normal, we're left with a challenging question. What do we do with our online communities? Some clergy and church councils are breathing a sigh of relief. "Thank God that's all over. We can put the camera phones and tripods into the vestry cupboard and get back to what we know." Others, like us, have decided to continue online activity, building it into how we understand our worship and community life of the future.

I'm left with the question that the entire C of E, probably the entire church around the world, is asking. Is this really church?

The Church of England has been built on the parish system. Everyone has their own parish church whether they attend services or not. While you can choose your friends, your parish church is something you are landed with. This is probably good for us. I don't know any other institution where you would interact on a weekly basis with as diverse a cross section of your community as in an average parish church.

However, I'm told that the average online worshipper in the UK visits up to four churches every Sunday morning. They have their favourite place to hear a sermon, their favourite place to join in the singing, their favourite place to chat with coffee. It seems less about "the body of Christ on Earth" as a Frankenstein church.

Then there's the question of the other "body of Christ" — the bread and wine of the Mass. The prayer for the Holy Spirit to transform bread and wine into the body of Christ is not transmissible through a screen is it? What if you watch it on playback? The mind boggles.

Fundamentally, I can't get away from the idea that physical presence matters. Matter matters. Yet that is not what I have experienced over the past two years.

Let me tell you about morning prayer. We invited our online congregation to share what they are praying for and now every day our prayers are led, not just by the member of the clergy at the pulpit but by people all over the world. I have never seen their faces but as our prayers are requested for their lives day after day I find myself caring about "Annabelle in Hong Kong" or "Baby Theo who is going for an operation".

Having church online means that we are linked as never before to people's physical worlds. When people join us in church buildings we see the polished Sunday-best version of themselves but as we connect with people in their homes we meet their pets and children, we see their normal surroundings. And Christ was rarely found in religious buildings. He went from house to house, meeting people in their homes. The thought occurred to me that what if we've forgotten that God is fundamentally domestic?

The church is challenged by this new world, where people join us from their homes even if they will never visit our church buildings. One can imagine all sorts of reasons why this might feel threatening. The fear of lack of commitment of our online congregations (which may be a thin veil for a question about whether people will give financially) seems to be unfounded as people are joining day in day out, week in week out, even as society opens up. And they are willing to contribute towards the financial and time resources that churches need to keep going.

For many, around the world the church has been inaccessible because of health or caring responsibilities or geographical reasons. The experience of the pandemic is that they can now be at the heart of a worshipping community. Whatever the challenges, theological and otherwise, I hope we persevere with online church not because we care less but because we believe more that the church body matters.

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