ONLINE CHURCH?

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John Benton

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Introduction

When the toothpaste is out of the tube there is no going back.

Something like that has happened for the churches through the coronavirus pandemic. Things have changed. For many people the ground has shifted.

We have lived through an event without historical precedent. Suddenly, because of the highly infectious disease, the majority of churches across the world could no longer meet. In-person services had to be cancelled. We needed to take seriously our duty to help protect our communities, Jeremiah 29.7, and do our part in stopping the spread of this very dangerous sickness, Mark 12.31. So, we went into lockdown. It was necessary to distance ourselves from each other in the crisis and, for long periods, most Christians felt they had to abandon meeting for worship.

Online services

Churches continued as best they could, using different means – mostly digital technology. Services went online. While we could no longer enjoy being in each other's presence, yet we could get together on screens from our homes. We couldn't listen to God's word together as a company of his people in the church building, but we could get the preaching through our wi-fi connection. We couldn't raise our voices together to praise God, but we could sing along as individuals or as families from the sofa using the laptop. And that experience has changed things. It has enabled us see new possibilities. It has made many people question the way we have always done church. It has caused us to think about church in a way we never would have done before. The toothpaste is out of the tube.

We have discovered a whole new world of digital technology that really works. We have found that, despite it initially involving a very steep learning curve, we can handle it. We have glimpsed the fact that this technology can save us a great deal of time – no need to get the car out and drive to church, and no need to worry about finding a parking space if the car park is full. We have also found that somehow more people have been tuning in online than would usually come to a morning service. That can't be bad, can it?

Yes, we do miss seeing people face to face and having a cup of coffee together after the service, but we can make up for that in a Zoom break-out room. The

digital technology appears to have made church so much easier and more convenient.

Expectations

And now things are changing again. We thank God for the scientists and the development of the vaccines that have enabled the possibility of returning to a more normal life in the near future. God willing, church buildings will reopen. But things will inevitably be different. And as we reassemble as churches, post-lockdown, attitudes in congregations will have changed. In fact, some may even see an argument for moving most of what we do as churches online – especially if we are wanting to reach younger people.

How are leaders to navigate all this and handle expectations? The purpose of this booklet is to get us thinking. Pastors and preachers may well want to take a new look at church in the light of what has happened.

1: Positives and Negatives

The pandemic has lasted for a long period. It has had enough time to have a substantial effect on the way we think. It has impacted different people in different ways.

Asking around the churches, there are different experiences coming out of lockdown. Some people are upbeat about online church. Others have had a bad experience of church during the pandemic. For many, online church felt very mixed. So, let's begin by trying to list some of the 'fors' and 'againsts' concerning digital church and hybrid services. By 'hybrid' I mean a service which is conducted both in person and online simultaneously. Here are some things I have come across. You may be able to add more.

Pros
We will look at the positives first.

- More people. When we looked at the numbers tuning in to services and counted them up, many churches saw that there was greater attendance than at their previous in-person services. I do not know how reliable it is, but one statistic I heard was that 23% of the nation had tuned in to a church service during the pandemic.

- More praying. It was not just the Sunday services for which attendance increased. It also seemed as if more church members were present at the mid-week prayer meetings and fellowship groups via online access.

- More participation. Although fellowship groups and prayer meetings online started off rather awkwardly as we were all getting used to things in lockdown, yet as time went on more people were praying or making contributions to the discussions – especially in small break-out rooms.

- More convenience. No doubt bigger attendance was connected to a need to see friends' faces, even on screen, while shut away in lockdown. But also, it had to do with the fact that it is much more convenient to connect with each other via digital means. It saves travel time to a venue. And when church or prayer meeting is over, we are 'back home' at the touch of a button.

- More response. A big memory for one online church was a kind of 'crowd funding' response when the needs of certain missionaries were made known. The digital giving was immediate and generous. Also there has been a lot of response to the offer of online courses when they have been mentioned in the services on Sunday. People have signed up for Christian basics courses, parenting courses, marriage courses etc, conducted online.

Some of what is listed here needs to be put in context. Remember all this happened while the country was experiencing a very dangerous and unusual set of circumstances. It didn't just happen because churches went online. Also, although more people attended services online, we are unsure how long many of them stayed in the services. Nevertheless, there are enough positives going on here for us to realize that we should take notice.

Cons
But the picture of church in lockdown was not all sunshine. We shouldn't get carried away. There were a lot of things which fell very short when it came to digital church.

- No singing. Even when, in God's goodness, the pandemic is over, if services remain digital, those participating online will not be adding their voices so that others can hear them. YouTube participants are audibly isolated. Anyone who has tried to sing together on Zoom knows how awful it is.

- Impaired fellowship. When we go to church in person not only can we chat after the service but also, we 'bump into' people. That doesn't happen online. But that kind of thing is crucial for a team spirit in the church. You can also look around the in-person congregation and perhaps spot someone who is looking a little down or lonely and decide to go and talk to them privately. Online that is not possible. During lockdown some have felt very neglected.

- Lax attitudes. Some people have spoken about the fact that online church can easily become 'pyjama church'. If church is going to take place in the sitting room, then why not get a cup of coffee and lounge around in the same way that you might watch a TV show on screen? But that doesn't sit too well with the NT instruction to 'worship God acceptably with reverence and awe,' Hebrews 13.28.

- Reduced commitment. Because an online service is accessible more or less anywhere, it means that church easily slips away from being the main event of Sunday to something that can be simply accommodated into what is perceived as a more important schedule. We can take more holidays and not miss church because we can tune in from the hotel or even the tent. We can catch up on the preaching on the way back from the match. Parents can decide it's much easier to both be involved in putting the children to bed on a Sunday night, rather than one attending church. 'We can have church on in the background and not miss anything.' Even before lockdown many churches had a high absentee rate on Sundays as members rather too frequently prioritized other things at the weekend. Online church exacerbates this. Also, of course, online services make 'church hopping' extremely easy. 'Which church shall we attend tonight?' 'Which preacher would you like to listen to this Sunday?' In fact, it may well be that some of the 'extra' people who have swelled the numbers at our online services have simply been those shopping around from other churches.

- Amplified fears. The virus has been very dangerous – especially for older people. As I write, more than 3 million people have died worldwide and as yet the pandemic shows no sign of abating. Despite vaccines, many have become very scared about meeting others in person. They therefore look upon the online service as very safe, and are quite resistant to returning to normal church. Pastors may well have great difficulty in persuading some vulnerable people ever to come to the church building again.

- Missing elements. While church is online, certain parts of church life are simply not possible. From the sedate handshake to the enthusiastic hug, we simply can't touch each other in greeting. A true NT communion, central to the life of the church, where we break bread and all eat from the one loaf together in person, 1 Corinthians 10.17, and so symbolize our unity, cannot take place. You can't baptize anyone virtually. It has to be in person. We could add to this 'off limits' list.

So, there are both positives and negatives in what has happened in churches during our digital experience brought on by lockdown. This means we need to think carefully about what we take on board for the long term and what we do not. The place to start our thought processes is to keep in mind what the NT says about what a church is.

2: What is church?

We need to keep in mind that with all the technology, we are trying to 'do church'. So we should remind ourselves of what a church is meant to be from the New Testament. To make good decisions, we must not forget our main aim. We need a clear vision of what we are about. As leaders, what is this 'church' thing we are meant to be pastoring and helping to build?

What the church is

The descriptions of the church which we find in the NT are numerous, beautiful and varied. The church is God's field, God's temple, the body of Christ, the bride of Christ and much more.[1]

But a simple way to get a grasp of what a local church is meant to be is to focus on Paul's words to Timothy. In his first letter to Timothy, he has been giving various practical instructions about how a church should worship and be organized. He completes what he has to say on the topic as follows: 'I am writing you these instructions so that, if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth,' 1 Timothy 3.14, 15.

Here we find 3 descriptions of what a local church ought to be. It is *firstly*, God's family or household. *Secondly*, it is the assembly, gathering (that's what the word translated 'church' means) for the worship of the living God. *Thirdly*, it is a broadcaster and defender of the gospel – the pillar which holds up the gospel for all to see and the strong foundation which keeps the truth from falling to the ground.

We can think of these 3 essential ingredients of church as 3 dimensions represented by the mnemonic IOU.

• **I**nwardly, there must be fellowship: there is a social dimension to church
• **O**utwardly, there must be mission and evangelism: there is a public dimension to church
• **U**pwardly, there must be worship: there is a God-ward dimension to church

So, a working definition of a church could read something like this: *A church is the people of God who gather under the Lordship of Christ, and in love and*

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[1] 1 Corinthians 3.9; 3.16; 12.27; 2 Corinthians 11.2

agreement with one another, to hear from God and worship him, and act as his witnesses to the world by their words and deeds.

Now, if this is a true understanding of the essentials of church, it gives a simple mental grid by which we can assess online church services. How does being online affect the inward, outward and upward aspects of church? Can 'church' in the NT sense happen online?

Essentially corporate

What we need to note in particular is that church is essentially corporate. It is a 'together' thing. In fact, each of our 3 dimensions of the church is corporate. A family includes a number of members, but it is one entity. The church is assumed, by definition, to assemble, to be together to worship and encourage each other. Further, even in mission, the church stands together. The truth is held up by one pillar, not many. So even where, for example, a church might have a gifted evangelist, the congregation as a whole gets behind his ministry, Phil. 1.27.

Let me borrow an illustration from Jonathan Leeman which might be helpful here.[2] Yes, we are still part of the church when we are apart – just as a footballer is still a member of the team when he is at home and not on the pitch. But here is the thing to understand: if he never gets on the pitch and plays together with the others, he can hardly be called a member of the team. Just so, if we never get together in-person at church, then (unless due to infirmity) we are not part of the church. Referring to the game and the team, it is worth noting how Jonathan Leeman summarizes, 'The function creates the thing, without which there is no thing.'

According to Jesus, church is where 'two or three come together in my name,' Matthew 18.17-20. Church is created by coming together in the name of Jesus.[3] If that never happens, then we do not really have church.

Distance church?

That is not to say that online services are wrong or useless. During lockdown they were helpful. But they are not church. We cannot substitute online services for in-person gatherings of God's people any more than playing an online video soccer game makes us part of a football team.

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[2] *One Assembly: rethinking the multisite & multiservice church models,* Jonathan Leeman, Crossway, 2020, p.44
[3] 1 Corinthians 5.4; 1 Corinthians 11.18, 20, 33 etc.

To put it as clearly as possible, **church entails us being together, whereas online facilitates us being apart**. That is actually the very point of those computer applications. A company wants to communicate while the executives are in different cities. To save travel time, they set up a conference call. But they are still apart. And further, with church, it was one thing to use this technology while we could *not* get together in person. But we must be careful not to harness it so that we no longer *need* to get together. When we can't is one thing, when we could and should but don't is another. Online fosters the idea of 'church at a distance'. That is an oxymoron.

What the church is not

Sometimes we have departed from the combined IOU view of church. We focus on just one or two of the dimensions. This gives us a distorted view of church and that distorted view might be more adaptable to going online. With this in mind, we should make sure that we understand what church is not. So, let's identify some common mistakes.

- *It's not just preaching*: Preaching is easy to broadcast. But preaching isn't an end in itself. It is meant to save sinners and edify the church. Its focus is church. If preaching does not take place in the congregation or have the aim of adding people to a congregation, then something is amiss. Those who received the message of Peter's preaching on the day of Pentecost were added to the church, Acts 2.41.

- *It's not just the leaders*: Because we see them at the front every Sunday, it is tempting subconsciously to equate the pastor or the music group with the church. But they are not the church. Putting these folk online does not make church.

- *It's not a 'service' for us*: Sometimes, what happens when the church gathers on a Sunday is referred to as a 'service'. But while there is an element of serving one another, first and foremost our gatherings are about serving God. It's about pleasing him primarily, not us. It is not a Sunday entertainment. That is why historically Sunday worship was called 'divine service.'

The bottom line is that you can't put church itself online. You can put certain elements of it online which can prove useful. But it is not church. So we need to think carefully where we take this.

3: Convenience versus community

The church is meant to be an in-person community of God's people.

C. S. Lewis wrote: 'No Christian…could accept the epigram which defines religion as "what a man does with his solitude". It was one of the Wesleys, I think, who said that the NT knows nothing of solitary religion. We are forbidden to neglect the assembling of ourselves together…We are members of one another'. [4]

Two level humanity
Emile Durkheim was a very eminent French sociologist. His pioneering research on groups and communities led him to propose that communities – like church – have a regular need to refresh and enhance their cohesiveness and commitment to one another and what they stand for. It would not be inappropriate to see Sunday church partially in those terms.

Durkheim thought of human beings as having two levels. Naturally, we are very good at being individuals in our everyday lives. But we also have the capacity and the need to function on a higher collective level and experience things which we only feel when we are together with others. This would apply to such things as team spirit, family joy or that special feeling of togetherness and oneness which might come upon us as we are in a choir or at a worship service. Durkheim described it as a kind of social 'electricity'. Interestingly, the individual level he labelled 'profane', while the corporate level he called 'sacred'. It is partly the function of a church service to pull people together into that higher collective attitude (linked with what Scripture would speak of as 'one new man', Ephesians 2.15). The group's identity and loyalty are strengthened. And Durkheim identified corporate actions like singing together, dancing together or chanting in unison as particularly powerful in building such a corporate attitude. [5]

Singing together
The OT has a whole book of songs which God's people sang – the Psalms. We can, for example, imagine the pilgrims going up to Jerusalem singing the songs of ascents together, expressing their solidarity on the journey. The NT puts singing together in church very much in the context of what we do for one another. Yes, we make melody in our hearts to the Lord, but simultaneously we are speaking

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[4] See Lewis's sermon, *The Weight of Glory*
[5] See *The Coddling of the American Mind,* by Greg Lukianoff and Jonahan Haidt, Penguin, 2018, page 100

to one another, Ephesians 5.19; we are admonishing one another, Colossians 3.16. The Lord Jesus and his disciples sang a hymn together before they went out to face Gethsemane, Mark 14.26.

Churches do not always make the most of it, but the power of singing together to build community has been exemplified in recent years by Gareth Malone's TV series, *The Choir.* Perhaps most famously it built enormous supportive sisterhood between those women whose men were in the British Army fighting in Afghanistan through the *Military Wives' Choir* in 2011.

Further, the God-ordained 'rituals' of church, like greeting one another and taking communion together at the Lord's table, especially reinforce the corporate / family dimension of our faith, 1 Corinthians 10.17; 2 Corinthians 13.12.

But it is these very activities which minister to the corporate strength of a church which are precluded by the online experience. YouTube is a one way medium and Zoom simply was not made to cope with singing or sharing bread and wine.

Hybrid services
Would it be a good idea to run hybrid services, with some people gathering together in the church building with others free to tune in online?

During the various phases of lockdown, churches have been forced to do this sometimes. Social distancing rules have meant that it was simply impossible to get the whole congregation together inside, so, often on a rota, some members were asked if they would like to attend in person on a particular week, while others made do with their screens at home.

During lockdown, I was involved in a rather fragile church restart in a nearby town. We tried the hybrid experiment on a number of occasions, but, although we did our best to make folk feel included, we soon found that those watching on Zoom at home felt somewhat left out. It was causing a sense of division in the small group. So we decided to back away from the hybrid set up. Durkheim's wisdom on how powerful doing things together in person is for corporate identity showed itself quite plainly.

Unity in the church is to be highly prized, John 17.20,21, and we are foolish if we do anything that might loosen ties or encourage division. The apostles might well

have taken a dim view of adopting methods and technology in the church which break the congregation in two, Titus 3.10. Rather Paul tells us to 'make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit….' Ephesians 4.3,4.

Aged and infirm

Obviously, when church members are too ill or too elderly to be able to get to a church service in person, it is both right and good to set up some kind of online access (or even telephone link) to the Sunday meetings. I'm sure these dear Christian people would far rather be attending in person than be housebound. Online provides something helpful for them, although it is less than they would like. If you can't meet your family in person, seeing them on FaceTime or the equivalent is at least helpful. However, making services available online to the infirm who cannot get to church is one thing. It is another to make it generally available to those who could come to church but choose not to.

It seems to me that this second category of people are ignoring the apostolic command, 'Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing…', Hebrews 10.25.

Making it too easy?

We are in danger of sacrificing our NT convictions about the nature of the church on the altar of convenience. Online church loses too much of the essence of what a church must be for us to buy into it permanently. It loosens the bonds between God's people too much.

Surrounded by an aggressive secular society the churches can be too desperate to make an impact. They can be too keen to make the world sit up and take notice and can be willing to bend over backwards to make that happen. But the danger is that we become people-pleasers rather than God-pleasers. Permanent online church is in this category, it seems to me. And it is a common experience that those who are prepared to let go of their convictions in order to please others, soon become despised by the very people they have been trying to please. Those people see through the game that is being played – 'success' at any price.

4: Capitalizing without capitulating

However, having argued that permanent online church is not a Biblical and acceptable way forward, it would be foolish to think there is nothing to learn from the online experiences imposed upon us through the pandemic.

 What can we legitimately take away from what the churches have been through? How can we capitalize? There are quite a few positives and ideas we can consider putting into operation which seem legitimate. Here are some areas to think about.

Outreach

We have certainly learned from lockdown that some non-Christians will still take opportunities to be a 'fly on the wall' and listen to what Christians have to say. A church should do its best to make the most of this. Mission and outreach is very important, Matthew 28.18-20. In aggressively secular times when the possibility of being seen to walk into a church building is too embarrassing for many unbelievers, something online, with which they can be involved in the privacy of their own homes, is attractive to them.

So, for example, a church can
- Offer a *Christianity Explored* course, or equivalent, online and invite people along to that. Something like the Zoom format enables Bible teaching, questions and answers. Perhaps this is the modern-day equivalent of Mars Hill in Athens, Acts 17.22f.
- Set up pre-recorded gospel messages or apologetics talks, or even interviews and testimonies, which people can access through a website and give the option of following up through online contact.
- Think out of the box. It may, for example, even be that a church could run a regular online 'service' for non-Christians at a certain time each week with a message, music and hymns. That might commend itself to some outsiders.

However, with this last option, it is very important to clearly separate this kind of 'seekers' service from true church. Many non-Christians liked the 'ritual' of online services during lockdown because it gave them a sense of security and the feeling that they had 'been to church'. This is okay in a sense, but plays into the hands of those who want to believe they are Christians when they are not; that they belong to the church when they don't. The danger is giving people enough

online 'Christianity' to inoculate them against wanting the real thing – radical new birth, John 3.3,6. So keep church, live, in person and separate from this sort of outreach.

With evangelism, it also is very necessary to realize that an online profession of faith is a good start, but until people are willing to identify with Christ, in person and begin to attend church, there must be question marks over how real that faith is. Secret believers do exist, but if their faith is real, they will eventually identify with the body of Christ, the church. The story of Nicodemus teaches us this, John 3.1,2; 7.50-52; 19.38-42.

Special interest groups
At any one time in a church, there may be those who require encouragement or teaching in particular areas of discipleship and the Christian life. Generally, in-person meetings are always better than online meetings, but while we don't want ever to undermine the in-person nature of the church meeting for worship and prayer, nevertheless other groups could be handled well online. For example, I have in mind things like

- Marriage courses
- Parenting courses
- Classes for young preachers
- A singles' group
- A young Christians in the workplace group

None of these may apply to the whole church, nevertheless they are very necessary areas of teaching and discussion, Ephesians 5.22-33; Colossians 3.20, 21. It might be too much to insist that folk give another evening at the chapel building, or wherever, to attend these. Often such people, especially parents with young children for example, are very pressed for time. But they could find time for an online course for an hour from the sofa at home – and be there together without having to arrange a babysitter. Also, with material like that in a marriage course, it might be better for a couple to be able to discuss questions together in the privacy of their own home, rather than talk about delicate matters concerning their relationship in the hearing of other people in an in-person meeting.

Team meetings
This is a 'time poor' society and, unless you are part of a bigger church with lots of paid staff, many aspects around the edges of church life are run by church members who have to do what they do for the church in their spare time.

Often such things as youth meetings, welcome teams, activities for the elderly, a church mothers' and toddlers' group, are run by little committees of 'amateur' church members. As has been said, in-person meetings are best, but busy people may not always have the time they would like in order to get together. Here again, online meetings may be convenient and help such leadership teams to stay in touch more easily, more frequently and perhaps, therefore, be more efficient in the Lord's work.

There may even be room for some online meetings for the elders and church leaders as they discuss and pray in pursuing the care of the church. But we will come back to that in the last chapter.

Extra fellowship
During lockdown, as people were trying to keep in contact and look out for each other, many Christians used applications like WhatsApp to text each other and ask if everything was alright or if they could help in any way. It helped many people to feel loved and cared for. This isn't as good as face-to-face fellowship, but it surely has an ongoing and legitimate part to play in the love of the church.

This kind of extra fellowship, perhaps among individuals involved in a home group or smaller church, might be extended profitably to online Zoom contact and the like.

Such uses of online technology have a place in the future of the local church.[6]

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[6] But it is worth remembering that, according to the most recent figures, 18% of people over the age of 65 are not online.

5: Considerations for leaders

Church leaders bear responsibility for their congregations before God. They are 'men who must give an account', Hebrews 13.17. Pastors and elders are charged with aiding the spiritual welfare of their people and with seeking to help the church grow.

In considering which parts of online technology can be included in the life of the church, leaders must be careful. They must resist being bamboozled by over-enthusiastic church members to adopt things – which might be damaging in the long run – just because they are new and different. But, on the other hand, they must try to make sure that they do not miss legitimate opportunities for the gospel (and bury their talent? Matthew 25.18) simply because they don't want change. Sometimes we need to embrace something ground-breaking.

Here are some areas which leaders ought to examine carefully.

Pastoral Care
The idea of putting church online might well appeal to introverted preachers. They love the time they spend alone in their libraries and the time they spend in the pulpit – delivering sermons. They don't even mind too much if they have to preach with a screen in front of them rather than a congregation. They are shy of people. They do not particularly enjoy engaging face to face with people. To put church online would hardly be a problem to them.

But can a pastor really handle his congregation and deliver pastoral care from behind a computer? The answer is surely 'No'. Consistently throughout Scripture, God himself delivers pastoral care of his people[7] by promising to be 'with' his people, not simply by watching them from heaven and communicating with them from a distance. David, famously, writes, 'Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me...' Psalm 23.4.

Membership
The strength of a church, humanly speaking, lies in those who are committed to it. The Bible leads us to think in terms of church membership. In the OT, we find head counts and long lists of names of those who belonged to the people of God

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[7] For example see, Genesis 28.20; Genesis 39.20,21; Exodus 25.8; Joshua 1.9; Isaiah 43.2; John 14.16 etc.

as distinct from those who didn't. In Acts, we find that people were brought to faith, and baptized and so added to the number of Christ's disciples, the church, Acts 2.41. We become 'members' of the body of Christ, Romans 12.5, 1 Corinthians 12.27, and use whatever gifts we have for the good of the church and its work. We are committed.

The process of being brought into membership may be different according to the church polity that is adopted. But the bottom line is that the members of the church must know each other. They must form one body which works together.

With this in mind, it would be very unwise to cultivate some form of online membership, or to try to include people in the membership of the church purely through some kind of online process. Leaders may be keen to grow the numbers on the church membership role, but they must be careful not to use online methods to cut too many corners. How are purely online members going to contribute to the good of others? A church in which the members hardly know one another, let alone love each other, is bound to run into problems.

Confidentiality
Sadly, we live in days in which the gospel and Bible churches have many enemies, Philippians 3.18, 2 Thessalonians 3.2. Biblical Christian faith is on a collision course with the whole 'politically correct' movement, which is trying to take over all public debate and which abhors the very idea of any norms in society created by God. So, for example, Biblical ideas of marriage, family and even gender have been under attack from certain elements in society for many years and that opposition is likely to get more intense. Besides all this, there is 'the offence of the cross', Galatians 5.11. We have to declare to the world the bad news as well as the good news. We have to proclaim that we are all sinners with no hope of rescue from eternal darkness except through Jesus' work at Calvary.

With enemies watching Bible churches, often with a view to accuse and even prosecute, is it wise for preaching to be generally live and online? What is said, even as an ill-expressed slip of the tongue, is captured in the archives of the digital world forever. We know how, even in the secular world, something a politician said in an off-the-cuff moment, ten years previously, which is now deemed politically incorrect, can be used to force an apology out of him or even to end his career. Do we really want to expose ourselves to that kind of possibility? Or will we handle this by preachers beginning to trim God's truth and

failing to mention anything offensive. Will such matters as the wrath of God and the need for repentance be dropped for fear of offending the sensitivities of some antagonistic viewer?

And this consideration applies not only to our preaching. Often as part of our meetings, we might have a visit from a missionary working in a sensitive part of the world. In the 'in person' church, where everyone knows everyone else, he or she is at liberty to speak openly about the situation on the field knowing that the church is mature enough to keep their mouths shut and to use the information only to fuel their prayers. But to broadcast online makes it very easy for agents, perhaps of a malign government, to glean information and perhaps even wreck God's work back on the field.

Similar considerations apply as well when people give a testimony in a service in which they may include very private details of their lives. Online, suddenly the whole world knows their business. Or again, a Christian consultant, for example, may be interviewed to share his thoughts on a contentious ethical matter in a service. He might be endangering his career if some pressure group gets hold of the recording.

When we move online, we are moving from having an audience within the church building we can basically trust, to an audience of whose composition we have no idea whatever. Yes, we want to get the gospel out. But is broadcasting live church really the best way to do that? Surely, we must be careful and be 'as wise as serpents and as harmless as doves', Matthew 10.16, in such matters.

Recorded meetings
Anything that is done online can be recorded. In some circumstances that option might be a good idea. If an elder of a church has a particularly difficult person to deal with, then perhaps, there should not only be a mutually agreed supporter present, but if both sides consent, the meeting could be recorded, in order that there would be no argument over who said what and how.

But there may be other situations in which for meetings to be recorded would be unhelpful and would make people feel that they could not say what they feel ought to be said. In this case, recording might actually be a means of intimidation and of suppressing the truth.

Leaders' meetings

According to the NT, churches ought to be led by a group of elders of whom the pastor / teacher is one, 1 Timothy 5.17,18. Deacons may also be alongside the elders to aid them in their care of the church, Philippians 1.1.

Mostly elders and deacons are people with other responsibilities including their secular employment and perhaps families with children. As we have noted before, such folk are almost bound to be under pressure for time. They want to serve and be useful to God's church, but they are under constraint.

With this in mind, it would be a temptation to move most leaders' meetings online. Digital technology does save time and often makes things more convenient. But again here, we need to be thoughtful. Maybe some leaders' meetings could be put online, but if we make online meetings the norm, we are likely to lose something vital from the team. Church leaders are not meant to be simply a group of executives, they are meant to be a band of brothers.

Would we want to tilt our own family interactions more toward video conferencing than being in person? We should ask ourselves that question about leaders' meetings, and indeed, about the church generally.

Conclusion

This booklet has attempted to encourage church leaders to think through, in a Biblical way, the use of online technology which the churches have utilized very effectively during the pandemic lockdown.

The bottom line is that church is not a spectator sport. Church is God's family, which requires personal involvement. It requires personal involvement together in the solidarity of worship. It requires love and personal involvement in the lives of brothers and sisters in Christ. Online technology, though helpful, cannot truly deliver on these things.

There are certain ways in which we can use online technology without compromising the essence of church. But we need to be discerning. There are positives, but we need to be honest about the downsides. In particular, the online world lures us with the promise of convenience. But is God always best served by what seems convenient to us?

The internet is a great servant, but we must not let it become our master.