

Digital Engagement; report for the Bishop’s Council Joy Rushton and Ronnie Semley, with Lindsay Wright. Sep. 2020

This is a snapshot of Diocesan events re digital/social media engagement since the advent of lockdown. It includes some national perspective, as well as other thoughts for future consideration.

The Bishop’s Council’s members are requested to:

- Reflect on how people in the diocese have been engaging digitally over the past five months.
- Consider what we are learning from this period of lockdown and how we continue to respond.

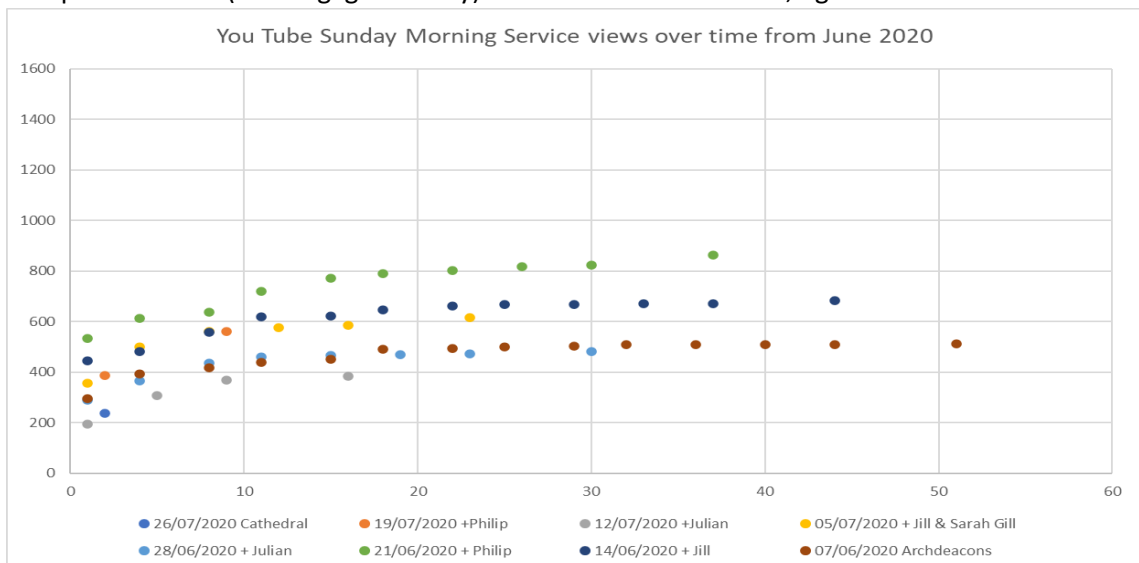
Overview

- Our Churches and the Diocese have produced a fantastic range of content to support regular churchgoers as well as those exploring faith during this time.
- Our church leaders have shown great creativity; agility; innovation, resilience, compassion, and many other qualities.

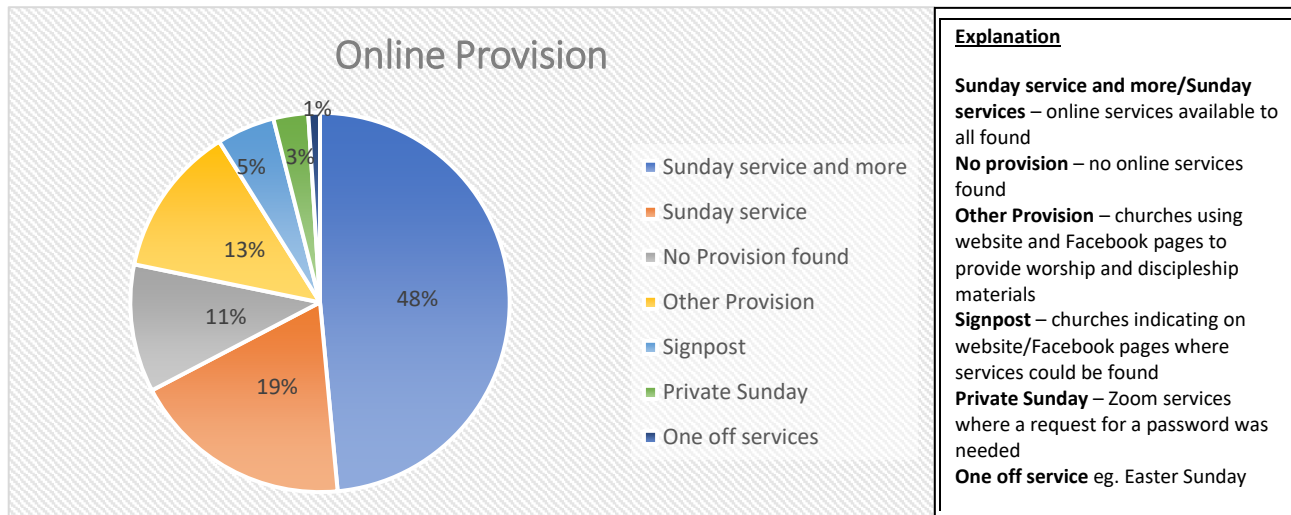


Online weekly services

- Sunday services on the Diocesan YouTube channel have been widely viewed, as have the range of one-off (and later weekly) messages from the Bishops, Archdeacons and The Dean.
- Viewing figures are very healthy – with services early in lockdown routinely viewed on average 1500+ times. Figures have decreased over time as more local churches have adapted and have been able to provide their own services, but services continue to have healthy viewing figures (see table).
- An already well-established YouTube channel (one of the top 5 for engagement in CofE) prior to lockdown greatly assisted our impact. Profile is further enhanced in a planned way by promoting each service/message across all our digital channels (including Twitter and our website) while a link to each new video is placed in the regular Task Group briefing. There is also promotion to (and engagement by) wider mainstream media, eg BBC Radio Lancashire.



- Meanwhile, the number of online weekly services across the diocese has increased. Our analysis shows nearly 50% of churches have been providing Sunday and mid-week services. The pie chart below offers a snapshot. Note too that churches were actively engaged offline as well as online: posting materials; phoning parishioners, supporting pastorally under current restrictions and guidance. Some churches not in the position to be able to provide online services (eg parishes with vacancies) produced and posted prayer/worship resources.
- Anecdotal evidence from church leaders also indicates that increasing numbers of people were engaging with prayer and worship during the week.



- One church leader reported that, in a 90-day period, there were 21,124 views on the church’s Facebook site. And after creating a YouTube account in March, 140 people had subscribed, with 3500 unique views: 72% from the UK and 28% from overseas.

Churches working digitally in the Diocese

- From the latest analysis, most churches were using Facebook as well as other media. Fewer churches were using Instagram but those that did had high numbers of followers: eg, Preston Minster has 836 followers. Twitter use by parishes not yet analysed.
- For the 168 churches using Facebook, 78% had over 100 followers and 20% of the 168 had over 500 followers.

Media used by Churches		
Facebook	YouTube	Instagram
168	82	4

Inclusion

- Whilst noting the importance of the numbers engaging for what it might represent in terms of increased coverage, it is important to note the importance individual stories of engagement within the figures. It has been widely reported that by operating online it has enabled many individuals to feel included.
- An important new innovation arising from lockdown has been the advent of the monthly Diocesan multilingual services. They have had a wide reach to people of different faiths and none in this country and overseas. Meanwhile, Revd Sarah Gill (pictured) has been invited by the national Church of England to lead a multilingual service in October.



- Online services for Thy Kingdom Come, organised by Fr Neil Kelley, were a great blessing to the Diocesan family. Through these services, people who worship in our parishes (and many who currently don't) were able to view services from the four corners of Blackburn Diocese and many in our parishes were able to lead us creatively in acts of praise and worship. It was an excellent showcase of the variety and vibrancy of worship in our Diocese across traditions.



Training churches through webinars

- In our diocese, 19 webinars have been run by diocesan staff, clergy and lay people so far. Topics have included: evangelism; forming character for mission; working online as a church; sharpening up preaching; bereavement; church planting; supporting vulnerable children; food poverty; a faith response to coronavirus in rural Lancashire and an introduction to online retreats. We have also promoted the National Church webinars.
- Peter Murden (from 'Digital Church Toolkit' and Preston Minster) as well as Norman Ivison, a retired BBC producer and Associate Minister of St James' Clitheroe, both offered free training and resources to people across the diocese; with Norman creating an online course for Readers nationally that we were able to 'piggy back' on and promote via our Diocesan website and the Task Group briefing.
- A Bible study resource on Acts, *A Transformed People*, written by Ruth Hassall, our Director of Discipleship, has been provided and been supportive for the growing number of people wanting to deepen their faith. Ruth is also looking at researching and developing resources to support parishes in the unique opportunities and challenges of discipling people who are either exploring faith, or who have come to faith, as a direct result of engaging with our online activity.

Sharing the Good News

- The national Church of England Digital Media team reports that social media posts of good news stories from around the dioceses, including ours, have been seen 1.6 million times so far with nearly 100,000 engagements (including link clicks).
- Our own Sunday diocesan services have included invitations to respond. We know from one church that two people responded at the end of one diocesan service, for example.
- Many of our churches are using video testimonies to help advertise their online Christian enquiry courses.
- Meanwhile many Churches in Lancashire have invested time and money to make their websites engaging and user-friendly.
- Our Diocesan YouTube channel had healthy levels of engagement before lockdown but subscriber numbers and viewing figures have risen massively since; from just under 500 subscribers and 125,000 views in early March to 1280 subscribers and more than 260,000 views today; a full fifth of the 1.3m total views on the national CofE YouTube channel!
- Meanwhile our Diocesan Twitter feed and Facebook page currently have a healthy 2.7k and 1.3k followers. These figures have also grown steadily during lockdown.

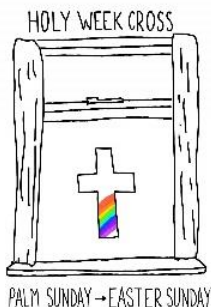


Other local examples of online/social media engagement, all of which featured in some way or another in the local and regional mainstream media including on BBC Radio Lancashire, include:

- Freedom Church, on the Mereside Estate in Blackpool, maintained the cycle of daily worship, Sunday services and other events on Facebook; delivering prayer sheets around their estate.
- At Buckshaw Village Church in Chorley they used Facebook for video teaching and other engagement; with regular thought for the day videos and church house groups on Zoom.
- Christians from across Burnley gathered for an ecumenical Stations of the Cross online this year after the original 'in person' service at St. Mark's Church in Burnley was cancelled.
- Meanwhile a 'Stations of the Resurrection' video initiative coordinated by St Laurence's in Chorley, featured Bishops and clergy from across the Diocese; 13 contributors in all.
- Like many of our parishes, St John's Church in Little Thornton launched their own YouTube channel and since then they have produced a variety of online services.
- And ... two donkeys (Bobby and Barney) joined the United Benefice of Balderstone, Mellor and Samlesbury's Palm Sunday 'Zoom service' plus 75 households from the three parishes!

Major campaigns locally and nationally

- #Lovethyneighbour was set up at Preston Minister. This scheme and other local initiatives responded to the needs created by Covid-19.
- At Easter the Diocesan #HolyWeekCross online campaign was promoted cross all our digital channels. It was hugely successful, with many parishes participating; dozens of pictures of crosses posted to Twitter and Facebook and valuable Gospel-focussed profile coverage secured in local/regional and national church media.



- There were many #HolyWeekCross stories. Caz Pinder, from Nelson, placed a wooden rainbow cross on the front of her house prompting many comments from neighbours. This encouraged her to invite neighbours out onto the street to pray one evening (observing social distancing rules of course). Many took her up on the offer to pray.
- Nationally, Lent and Easter 2020 resources were seen millions of times while The Lord's Prayer Easter reflections saw an average 41% daily email open rate, which is more than double the industry average for similar online mailings.



Blackburn Diocesan Board of Education report from Lindsay Wright

- The team at Blackburn Diocese Board of Education (BDBE) has a strong heart for creating resources for schools and parishes to use in their work and ministry, and for families to use at home; all so children and young people can hear about God, discover their own faith, and learn from others about what it means to be a Christian.
- Weekly@ is our free lectionary-based resource and has been running for seven years providing everything a children's group could need on a Sunday morning in one downloadable resource. This year's Weekly@ special was a Faith at Home version and was well received; being downloaded as churches sought ways to continue supporting families at a distance. Weekly@ was adapted into Faith at Home activities, which we posted on our social media channels so those who work with children could easily share with their families.
- Our newest resource, Bible Podlets (a Bible storytelling podcast for families and children) had just been released, and therefore fit perfectly for those wanting to have a something

they could give to families so they could continue hearing about God outside their newly formed online groups. This is now one of our biggest resources, with the first series reaching over 20,000 unique listens and series 2 being created.

- It also meant that we were very quickly able to start a brand-new resource, Off the Shelf, which was a collective worship video and picture resource, using a mixture of our social media channels, YouTube and our Resource Area.
- Off the Shelf was created and existed to meet the needs of our schools and those who engage with them during lockdown. It is an example of how we've been able to creatively adapt and develop our ways to serve those who work with children and young people, and over the coming months we have even more resources that are set to come out, which are currently in development.
- During lockdown not only have been able to grow our resources, but we have also been able to grow our connections through online and digital training and live communications. These have been brilliant for creating community, providing space for people to hear what others have been doing in their parishes.

Some further thoughts on digital engagement; including the future mainstream media landscape

- It has been a challenging time during lockdown. It has also been an opportunity. Prior to the pandemic there was a steadily growing level of engagement with digital and social media at broadly similar levels in all CofE Dioceses.
- It is now commonly held to be the case that lockdown has accelerated overall parish digital engagement nationally to levels not anticipated for at least another five years, or longer.
- At the same time the Diocese now has an Online Resourcing Group, convened since lockdown, meeting fortnightly to monthly, and chaired by Bishop Jill. This group aims to provide support for parishes in their digital efforts by coordinating everything from the weekly services to webinars. The Terms of Reference are as follows:
 - a. Enable and signpost *Making Disciples, Being Witnesses* resources
 - b. Review diocesan online worship offering
 - c. Join the dots and encourage Board of Education online presence
 - d. Draw out the best of learning and resources Blackburn Diocese
 - e. Draw in the best of online / filming expertise
 - f. Thinking about what online offering might look like after lockdown

The group members are: Claire Cooke (curate of St Thomas' Lancaster), Jim Cooke (Centre-line films representative) Sarah Gill (vicar of St Stephen's and St James' Blackburn), Ruth Hassall (Director of Discipleship), Joe Kay (member of the digital team at St Aidan's Blackburn), Fr Neil Kelley (Rector of St Laurence, Chorley), Peter Murden (Digital Toolkit team member), Joy Rushton (Being Witnesses Manager), Ronnie Semley (Communications Manager), Lindsay Wright (Board of Education Digital Media and Resource Lead. The group also benefited from the expertise of Dave Champness (Vision Consultant) and Nick Clarke (Clarke PR and Media).

- Looking to the future, we should consider how we facilitate the telling of stories on video for sharing on our social media channels and with the local mainstream media; encouraging our parishes to share and promote digital content on their own social media channels as part of this work that we can then 'amplify' on Diocesan channels and further afield.
- The importance of digital content when promoting what we do as a Diocese will also become increasingly important when engaging with the mainstream media. A new media landscape is beginning to emerge and what lies ahead may also include a difficult future for many of the more 'traditional' media outlets.

- Local and regional news content will still be produced and newspapers will continue to be printed for the immediate future at least, but some papers will merge permanently (the Leyland Guardian has merged with the Chorley Guardian, at least temporarily, during lockdown to give a local example). Meanwhile, some will disappear completely and newsrooms could further merge into regional ‘hubs’ across the country.
- Some regional newspapers may eventually move their attention completely online, concentrating on their digital sites as the print sales decline. Redundancies are inevitable and have started already in some parts of the country.
- Meanwhile reputable online news blog sites staffed, at least in part, by trained journalists – like Blog Preston – are on the rise and could provide us with options as a Diocese for alternative engagement; as they take their share of the news market.
- More digital TV news channels like That’s Lancashire TV could appear while existing regional TV and radio stations are not immune to the effects of the pandemic. As announced over the summer, there are plans (still to be finalised) for less local content on BBC local radio stations for example, partly in response to the lockdown. We will keep a close eye on this – particularly if it should result in less faith-based content than there is already.
- While the entire media landscape changes we also have an opportunity to be heard in new ways; for example, by adding video and other digital content to press releases we issue to maximise the chance of overall engagement by all media outlets.
- Having an increased digital focus would also give us a greater chance to reach people where they are, in an unfiltered way.
- Religious illiteracy is high in today’s society (including the mainstream media, sadly) but through our digital channels we have a chance to speak directly to ordinary people everywhere and deliver the Gospel message direct to their online devices.
- There a huge importance in ensuring people return to church in person of course. But nowadays (when it appears less people will be ticking the ‘Christian’ box on the next Census forms in 2021 and more people are feeling uncomfortable just entering a church building) for some people, breaking down those barriers online first has to be a good thing.

Parish websites and targets for future engagement

- As reported above, many parishes have already made their websites engaging. Exploring ways to support parishes make websites as user-friendly as possible should also be considered while there are also opportunities for nearby parishes to learn from each other.
- Website improvement can be as simple as engaging with the ‘A Church Near You’ website, now with functionality that makes parish ACNY homepages appear like an ordinary website.
- This is beneficial in two ways ... the first is that any changes that are required on parish websites (such as having when parishes were asked to have a safeguarding link on the homepage) will be applied automatically; centrally. The second is cost – even a quite basic website usually costs money to be hosted somewhere and often there are design costs too. ACNY is completely free.

Summarising learning/discussion points from this time of lockdown ...

- The centrality of worship – we will continue to promote the monthly multilingual service and Sunday online services but will be inviting local churches to provide a service to be shared on the Diocesan YouTube channel.

- The resurgence in the importance of prayer.
- The importance of helping people on the fringes to find faith and, consequently, the importance digital engagement has in an increasingly secular society; while supporting parishes in doing this, including with people who have already engaged during lockdown.
- The importance of ‘strengthening our nets’ and following God’s leading together. An example being the planned #HomeGrown conference, giving opportunity for clergy and lay people to share together in an event entitled ‘Hearts on fire with love for you’.
- Future resourcing of digital to be considered carefully; including the future development of the new Online Resourcing Group. Maximising the support to parishes for minimal outlay is important in challenging times ahead for the whole Diocese in the wake of the pandemic.
- Considering how we support parishes in relation to their websites.
- Being aware of the changing media landscape, which will impact the way we promote and engage with the wider public longer-term.
- Developing ways of working with parishes to amplify new/existing local digital content.
- And the need to consider ways to get smarter with digital analytics so we can better gauge overall impact of the work we are doing in this area.
- Finally, based on what we know already about parish digital engagement and extrapolating forward, we also feel it would be helpful to set some *achievable* targets to encourage general ongoing digital engagement across the Diocese. Further research on digital use in parishes is still being undertaken, so please note these targets may evolve/change but at present we are considering the following straightforward aims as achievable by 2024 ...
 - At least 50% of our parishes offering online worship of some form or another.
 - At least 75% having at least one *active* social media feed – Twitter; Facebook etc.
 - At least 25% being able to offer an online Bible study course.