

Hybrid Church



The last 12 months have impacted the life of our churches more than probably any other event in most of our lifetimes. No-one can deny that this has been challenging and difficult, but it has also revealed our flexibility and perhaps also helped us to focus on what really matters, as we have been forced to express that in new ways.

What we would have to admit is that a great deal of what we have done, particularly in relation to use of new technologies has been “reactive”. We simply had to find ways of embracing sudden and unexpected change, often learning to do this with the resources that we most at hand.

For all that this is true, and while some aspects of local church life have been hampered, we have also encountered some unexpected benefits and opportunities through this. As we now consider “*life after lockdown*”, many are wondering how to re-establish physical worship gatherings, while at the same time not losing some of the benefits of being online.

We might look to well-resourced, large churches (often in the US) and recognise that it is quite possible to offer a high-quality broadcast of our gathered services, but equally acknowledge that we simply do not have the resources and expertise to do anything similar. Being able to broadcast from our living rooms may have its disadvantages, but it offers a connectivity and engagement that is much more difficult to achieve when a public gathering is being televised, unless we have significant production facilities and personnel.

It is for this reason that many congregations are beginning to speak of “hybrid church” – a church that re-opens and begins to use its premises again, but also seeks to retain some form of online engagement. There are a number of practicalities and issues that need to be engaged with in this respect which are covered in other NWBA resources. This document seeks to complement these by simply seeking to offer a number of potential models of hybrid church, which have emerged from various conversations.

This is important for us as an Association Team, because we sense that part of our role in the future might be to offer resources to support “Hybrid Church” – these will clearly be affected by the particular models that churches seek to implement. Working online offers significantly more opportunity for collaboration and sharing of resources, a Baptist Association has a potential role both as a provider of these resources and also an enabler of collaboration.

Introduction

Some General issues

Perhaps the first thing to consider are the different elements that are involved in making online provision. In particular we might consider the difference between “curators”, “creators” and “connectors”. According to sources, there is more content uploaded to YouTube (which is by no means the only online platform) in one day than any individual is capable of watching in the average human lifetime. We have to accept therefore that any online content we offer is not something that does not already exist in some shape or form, and is very unlikely to be found unless we have ways of engaging people with it.

What makes a channel distinct is that it is provided for a recognised community of individuals who have a deeper common bond than simply watching the same content. It is this shared

engagement that defines the event rather than the content itself. This means of course that the shared watching does not necessarily need to be of material that the church itself has produced. It might help therefore for churches to recognise three distinct roles:

Creator: As the name suggests, a content creator physically produces the streamed material. This might be a worship team leading sung worship, a preacher, a Zoom interview with a Christian overseas or a livelink to a church family. The benefit of church created content is that it creates a sense of “inclusion” by physically featuring members of the community and also generates messages and narratives that reflect the priorities and purpose of the church. The disadvantage is that it can prove extremely difficult to produce high quality content, it is often time consuming and can demand significant investments of time to sustain.

Curator: As acknowledged above, there is already significant online content available to churches, and while this often means that it is equally available to every member of the church, they are unlikely to find and watch it without some direction and promotion. Remembering that this is a “shared experience” we also want to create the benefit of people watching the same thing at around the same time. A church might therefore act as a curator – finding material to include in a shared gathering, arranging and broadcasting this in a way that conveys a message consistent with its own priorities and values. The advantage of this approach is that it saves the time and effort of content creation, the disadvantage is that suitable content can often be hard to find, there is less control over the messages that are conveyed, and there can often be significant copyright issues and uncertainties associated with using other people’s material.

Connector: Engaging with material online also creates a sense of connection between those who participate. The most obvious example of this would be Zoom, Facetime or one of a host of other video communication platforms. In such instances, there is little or no prepared content, people recognise the value of simply being able to see friends, engage in conversation and interact. But even passively watching a broadcast that others are viewing creates a sense of connectivity, this might come from nothing more than simply knowing that others are engaging at the same time, or through enabling ongoing conversation and engagement that arises from the shared content. A clear trend in much mainstream broadcasting, largely made possible through online technology, is towards more interactive programming where audiences are able to engage, vote, offer feedback etc.

The reality is that almost all broadcasted material is a mixture of these three. Even a mainstream TV channel will be a fusion of live news bulletins etc., commissioned pre-recorded programmes (sometimes produced in collaboration with other networks), and outsourced material (e.g. a film previously released in cinemas). It will also offer occasional regional programmes to localise an otherwise national schedule. What we might not always notice is that a good degree of the continuity and engagement is achieved through the (usually unseen) announcer who engages with the audience between programmes.

Recognising our purpose

While this is true, it is helpful to recognise these three distinct elements and consider the relative importance of each of them to our specific context. Each are present in varying degrees in the models that are summarised below.

It is not our purpose however in this document to work through these various issues, but rather to offer some models that have either been set in place by local churches, or are being

imagined as they look to the future. There are elements that appear in more than one of them, many of which overlap. There are also many other models that could be constructed to suit different contexts by mixing and matching the various components. They are offered as a resource to fuel your own imagination.

Possible models of “hybrid church”

These models are based on the experiences and ideas of various churches in NWBA. The titles are ones that we have devised to try to describe them, but would often not have been used in the contexts from which they have come. In some cases these are clearly perceived as interim arrangements while lockdown remains in place, though many are already considering how elements within them can be maintained or developed. We are not experts, so this is simply a summary of what we have observed churches doing – you would need to ask around to determine how successful some of these have been.

Livestream

The most basic concept, albeit often the most technically challenging is to simply livestream a physical gathering. However, presenters might also be aware of people watching remotely and seek to deliberately include them (e.g. by direct speaking into camera at key points).

Studio Church

While appreciating “worship from home” some churches have expressed a preference for services that are led from a more recognised “place of worship”. This has resulted in some meeting spaces being re-purposed to provide a studio base for streaming. Although this might be seen as offering opportunity for physical gathering as well, in reality this is considerably limited by needing to re-design space and introduce obtrusive lighting and camera equipment etc. This does allow speakers and worship leaders a degree of interaction with a congregation, but this tends to be comprised of the technical team, those presenting and their immediate “bubbles” who arrive in anticipated of traditional lines of sight being disturbed etc. There is a degree to which, in this model, those who are physically in the building perceive of themselves as serving those are outside of it and join online, rather than the key thrust of the service being directed at those who are physically present. This “outward looking” is an important common understanding to maintain in “studio church”.

In some cases, churches have used platforms like “Zoom” to allow interaction with the online congregation, projecting participants on-screen etc.

Alternating Model

A church might re-plan its Sunday schedules where certain services will continue to be offered as physical gatherings, while others are online. So, for example, it might decide to physically gather (say) once a month, perhaps for an extended period, maybe including food and social engagement and then offer online gatherings for the remaining Sundays of the month. It is likely that in addition to the monthly (or fortnightly) regular gathering, physical gatherings will be arranged for what we might describe as “high days and holy days”.

Shared watching

This model would retain the approach of either creating or curating an online event, but also providing the opportunity for a shared physical gathering at which people can watch it together. Most churches now have digital projection and sound facilities, so it would not be difficult to create some social space – perhaps opening the building and providing tea and coffee half an hour or so before the service is broadcast, and then inviting those who gather to engage with the service as it is streamed.

This could be a gathering to watch material specifically prepared for the event, to watch something that may already be available, but choosing to create community by watching it together. It might also be an opportunity to watch a livestream from another church or organisation with which we have an existing relationship.

This approach makes it very easy to stream the content being shown in the physical gathering so that any who wish to join online can do so.

Watch party

This is very similar to the model above, but takes place in virtual rather than physical space. Several social media platforms include facilities to engage with a group of others in watching third party broadcasts together. While there may be several hundred, perhaps even thousands of people watching, you are able to engage with a small group of colleagues who have been specifically invited to watch at the same time, usually able to use comments etc. to interact.

Purposed gatherings

Another realisation is that while in days past, a local church needed to conduct all of its business through physical gatherings, this is no longer the case. One observation through lockdown is that people seem more open to engaging with longer sermons and studies when they are able to do so in their own time in the comfort of their own home, than when they are together in church buildings.

So, for example, a physical worship gathering could be arranged where there is no traditional sermon, but this has been distributed, made available online and engaged with in the previous week. A physical gathering would be a more social, conversational and worshipful event centred around the key themes of the teaching programme, but this would be provided by other means. The outline above is only an example – others might equally be attracted to an arrangement where the teaching programme remains the key element in physical gatherings, but opportunities to engage, pray and deliberate would be provided online.

Networked Congregation

Some churches are exploring re-introducing a physical gathering, but asking that congregation members continue to bring smart devices and engage with one another through these. This means that those who cannot or do not feel safe joining the physical gathering, are still able to fully participate. Technical issues around muting when multiple users are in the same room together would need to be resolved by some form of protocol.

Itinerant Model

One of the advantages of being a Baptist Association is that we have established relationships with other local congregations. Some have already begun to consider how they can work together with other churches in their locality to ensure that there is a physical weekly gathering always available in one of their buildings. This however would be complemented by a shared online gathering that could be enabled through the resources released through every church not needing to arrange a separate weekly service. Some individuals may feel sufficiently mobile to attend all of the weekly gatherings, others might attend none, while others might mix and match depending on the locality. By working in partnership, a group of churches would ensure sufficient continuity between the online and physical services to maintain a sense of ongoing belonging and purpose.

Interdependent model

Some churches have gone so far as to consider suspending regular Sunday services altogether. They imagine a situation where a group of churches pool resources so as to offer a weekly online gathering of sufficient quality and relevance to serve the needs of all congregations for a regular Sunday gathering. This does not mean that the church would cease to physically meet, but would concentrate its efforts on building community and discipleship through other physical gatherings that can be more defined by this purpose.