

THE GREEN SOCK



NEWS FROM THE SHROPSHIRE AND MARCHES METHODIST CIRCUIT

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ONLINE WORSHIP DURING LOCKDOWN AND BEYOND

Addressing the use of online technologies in worship over recent months, The Learning Network set up a virtual gathering for those involved in planning and leading online worship and those interested in doing more. Using Zoom (a cloud-based video conferencing service which allows participants to meet using online video and audio or telephone,) attendees shared experiences and ideas born out of desires to keep congregations worshipping, attending church services and maintaining some church activities as the Covid 19 pandemic continues. The informal gathering featured Revd. Dr Jo Cox-Darling (Wolverhampton Circuit), Marc Clarke (Vale of Stour Circuit), and Shropshire and Marches' Revd. James Eaton Challinor describing how their churches have contended with various video conferencing, screening and streaming services to provide Sunday services (available throughout the week), Bible Studies, online prayers and more.



Kerry Scarlett (Birmingham Circuit), who along with The Learning Network's Jon Pedley arranged the meeting said in opening, that an ongoing exploration of learning and development needs is being nurtured and that it was not only the District's young people who were "having a go". She said she had personally found online engagement "quite tiring" and that this *Church Without Walls* format required much learning. "It's a joy but also a challenge, when tech lets us down or by just being exhausting," she said, adding that collaboration and a willingness to be vulnerable can help to counter this.

Jo Cox-Darling who has pastoral oversight of four congregations, praised the efforts of the District in what has been achieved through almost instant transition to utilising online opportunities. While her *learning point highlight* is being able to remain present in the face of technical difficulty, her congregations have accepted Zoom Sunday Worship and use Zoom for a mid-week Hymn Half-Hour and Coffee Morning as well as a monthly quiz. Pre-recording hymns with the pianist and recording the audio from Zoom to MP3 enables a twenty-four hour dial-up to listen as required. Meanwhile Jo's churches' social media has been "left to have a life of its own without me mediating or moderating" and the technical efficiency of church buildings has been boosted by installing an ethernet connection which not only operates on faster speeds but is available should WIFI be interrupted. Collaborating with Shropshire Storytelling Network and learning video editing are among the practical steps Jo has taken to ensure content is engaging and that what is filmed is recorded satisfactorily, as well as signing up to an online payment portal for Offerings. Although she has found conducting funeral visits; learning about someone's life, tricky on Zoom, all her funerals have been livestreamed.

Hybridity (a fusion of online and in-church worship,) and the sustainability of formats currently being used are the new concerns. However, Jo has no vision of how any transition will take place but states this relies on her building a team to meet the needs of the community and an online space – a presence which has brought some great partnerships with local people. "There are people who are housebound. Isolated is their normal and we need to honour that. Doing church online and being an online church are two different things," she said adding "there is some digital poverty and some people don't want to have access to technology." The management of meetings is also a concern. "The problems of an online Circuit Meeting of seventy-five callers, seventy-five screens, is physically and mentally exhausting as is having to manage the resulting frustrations this causes, plus sending out service sheets and information for those not online." She is keen for others to get involved and do the learning as well.

Revd. James Eaton-Challinor echoed Jo's sentiments on exhaustion. "The big issue is sustainability of lay and ordained ministers but we're relatively few so also we're all just really tired so there's a frustration, not with the people unable to access technology, but in how to bring onboard those people who are unwilling. Also the inability to share bread and wine deeply pains me and I have concerns about physically presiding".

Despite lockdown, particularly initially, figuratively shrinking the Circuit geographically James said, demographics

presented some problems with using Zoom for Sunday services but these were readily solved and some churches are now using Zoom and Facebook Live for various online ministries. According to James a third to a half of worshippers are dialling in and/or use the Twilio platform which offers SMS, voice, video, WhatsApp and email routes to listen or view after broadcast. "Our service is a collaborative production with one act of worship where other colleagues produce other things. We pre-record (having initially tried live), which is preferred, but being the Zoom controller, I still get stomach flutters and panic, so I log-in from another device as backup." James offered.

"The service lasts thirty-five minutes there are visual elements; we might use a picture but we shouldn't rely on that for those dialling in." A recent introduction was break-out rooms, dividing the congregation into smaller groups for post service conversations and this has been positively received. "Previously we'd end with people waving goodbye and leaving but breakout rooms randomly assign people, so you end up with people you don't know so it's an opportunity to meet new people." Going forward James predicts a hybrid model offering both online and in-church worship. "Another positive is that online is different. We are not trying to replicate the face to face physical church. The age of our Local Preachers and how they feel about going physically to church means there is a reluctance and not just among those who are housebound."

Worship with Shropshire and Marches is also available as a podcast which allows access to worship at any time. "Some colleagues are offering Bible Studies as podcasts and the Circuit Bible Studies take place on Zoom. The issue is getting our folks to engage in that way, so we now ask, how do we move to a more online community? And going from *consuming* worship to something else." The solution might be incorporating Zoom services into the Plan and assigning preachers to prepare them. Additionally, one of James' churches has a Toddlers and Carers group which is not currently meeting. He is keen to experiment and provide something more online for them. "It's (having) time really and making it up as we go along, so that has to be about broadening things from among our church folk and wider community."

Both Jo Cox-Darling and Marc Clarke (Social Media, Church Council at Kingswinford Methodist), spoke of encountering problems when including third party copyright material in broadcasts, which they both overcame by purchasing a Circuit-wide CCLI licence for their churches. Describing the headway made over the past three months Clarke stated it was essentially a series of trials and errors. Early attempts using Jitsi, another open-source video conferencing platform, revealed a non-compatibility with older versions of some browsers, so his team built their own server. When ninety people logged on to their first service there were manifold problems with people not muting microphones, video and audio playing out of sync and the need to educate people in using the technology was clear. Currently their services are led by five or six people who meet and record the service (whilst social distancing,) which includes a YouTube video. This is then linked to the Vale of Stour streaming service alongside weekly Bible Studies and Prayer Time.

Like Jo and James, Marc regrets the absence of sharing bread and wine. He is appreciative of and feels blessed with the technical assistance from within church and without that has enabled significant progress in just three months. While his congregations remain as critical as ever and many people do not wish to return to worshipping in a church building until a vaccine is available, he feels it is taking "an unbelievable measure of commitment to make this thing happen" and people are eager and offering to get involved.

More Zoom gatherings on Online Worship -Hybridity and Sustainability are planned for July and August. To sign up, please email Jon Pedley at The Learning Network: pedleyj@methodistchurch.org.uk.



CHALKBOARD MINISTRY –AMID ALL THE TECH

With church doors closed, Revd. Jo Cox-Darling has found that a chalkboard, placed at the end of the manse driveway is an ideal way to engage with people. It helps that her family live next door to the church which is on the main thoroughfare through the village to Wolverhampton city and guarantees footfall. Each Sunday since lockdown, Jo has written a message and left an activity offering something to inspire passers-by "to think about their soul". On Vietnam Veterans Memorial Day there were Peace Packs with origami people. Love Hearts accompanied a prayer on the board supporting Black Lives Matter. "I try and use the Language of the Ancients, Jesus or the Psalms and have done something every Sunday, every week. It's not quite proclamation, but Christian-centred, from our perspective to bless our community." There have been tealights, holding crosses and with her daughter's birthday this weekend there will be birthday cake Jo informed adding, "For me the keys are about spirituality and soulfulness and ritual. It has been really fun to watch how many people engage with it, sit, read, take photos, some people double back, some deliberately travel to it as a place of pilgrimage. One thankyou card read: 'You must be from the church because only the church can offer hope right now.'"