

What is a church? Or rather, when is a church not a church? Before Lockdown, I thought I knew. Church as I had always encountered it was a gathered congregation: a group of people meeting for worship, whether in a church building, a village hall, a cottage kitchen or on a hillside. So, much as I love a beautiful cathedral, an imposing parish church or a fine Methodist chapel, it is the meeting together that matters more than the setting: around the Word and around the Lord's Table. For me it is also all that goes with that: singing together, hearing scripture read and expounded together, praying together, and what we call fellowship: just being together. Of course, there comes a time when, perhaps through illness or age, members of a church are unable to share that fellowship: but for many years the opportunity existed to join a congregation at a distance, via radio or television – limited now to Songs of Praise and perhaps a special programme around Christmas or Easter. And there is something special about Communion at home.

For some time now churches have been recording services, and more recently live-streaming them. So when Lockdown was imposed upon us, it was possible to join with others in a new way: at first in a church building, and later from a preacher's home: I and many of my fellow preachers learnt new skills, using our computers or smartphones (I still don't have one of those, by the way). It was strange, creating a service by recording oneself at home, or joining a zoom link – at least then being able to see who else was taking part. As some church congregations began to meet in person again many of us continued to worship at a distance via live-streamed services – a sort of holy 'working from home', I suppose.

As I carry out my chaplaincy work, I often find that offices are empty, because people are still working largely from home. When they do come together, there is such a wonderful sense of – well, joy – at being able to work side-by-side and talk with each other. But remote working is here to stay, I think. Meeting online via Zoom or Teams saves members of a committee from having to travel long distances; and it means a lot to be able to take the children to school and get the shopping done or go for a walk, while still doing a day's work. Having said that, a couple trying to work from home in a small flat, say, may find it difficult and stressful, especially if what's on the screen is confidential.

Where am I going with this? A Methodist church in Basingstoke recently made the decision to sell the building after over a century of worship and become an online church. At first they continued the online services that had enabled them to worship during lockdown alongside traditional in-person services. Online they found that more people joined them than ever did in the chapel. So Kempshott Methodist Church has now been renamed The Church of the Living Stream, meeting online for Sunday worship and Wednesday fellowship meetings. 'In the physical church all you get to see are the back of people's heads,' said one of the leaders; 'Online you can see everyone's faces.'

I can't help feeling that something has been lost here, but I do know that our connexional Faith and Order Committee is now looking at what it is to be a church, including the issue of how Holy Communion can be celebrated in a digital church. The Revd Katie Tupling is a

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keynote speaker at an online discussion this coming Saturday, 30 September: 'Exploring Digital' (www.methodist.org.uk/ExploringDigital/). She says, 'In 2020...we took the church, and God, online ...There was talk of Church Online as a place of Exile.' In south Basingstoke the Church of the Living Stream is no longer that: the 'place of exile' has become 'home' for them.

Our congregations have not fully recovered from Covid and lockdown, perhaps for the same sorts of reasons that working from home is here to stay: the comfort of staying in and joining Godalming United Church on YouTube, for instance, or Wesley's Chapel, for that matter, rather than going out on a cold and wet day. Perhaps God is moving us on in this digital age, but I must say that I love a good sing! I'll see you soon in a church near to you, I hope...

God bless,

Peter