

Lessons of Lockdown

by Marion Shoard

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Cheryl McKellar Young is the minister in a Church of Scotland kirk nestling under the Pentland Hills on Edinburgh's southern fringes. At Christians on Ageing's Conference Call in January 2021 she said that our online video discussions gave her the unique opportunity to share views and experiences with other people in church communities hundreds of miles away: she would never have managed to attend a conference in, say, Sheffield or London in person.

Conference Call is one of the many new facilities by which the digital world has thrown open opportunities for engaging with other people during lockdowns, rather than being simply a means of overcoming restrictions on travel and face-to-face meeting. There have been many others. The live-streaming of Sunday morning services and the convening of prayer, study and after-church coffee gatherings on Zoom have afforded access to people who previously could not attend such events in person, as they were housebound, lived in a care home or had moved out of area. In many church communities the last year has seen these people reliving the joy of being inside church on a Sunday morning and also of mixing with church friends previously, and sometimes long, denied them.

As churches address the shape of their activities post-lockdown, it looks likely that some of these digital events will survive. Many are planning to continue to livestream their Sunday morning services, not just for people who could never get to church, but also because such access suits members of the congregation who are away on holiday, in hospital or staying with relatives. Some churches are planning to do more: Rosemary Feuell, a trainee Anna Chaplain based in the parish church of Cambridgeshire's biggest village, Sawston, told me that St Mary's had begun to share Compline weekly by Zoom during lockdown and that she expects this will continue into the future: "It's so much more convenient for people who don't want to go out on a dark night".

Help with Digital

Church congregations now and in the future will continue to include people who cannot access the screen world – often older, they may not be able to afford broadband bills or to

buy a computer or smartphone. Or they may not be able to work digital equipment with confidence through lack of training. So what should churches be doing to help these people?

McKellar Young plans to introduce classes in computer skills for older people next summer, led by young people in her congregation. Attenders will be able to start from scratch or tackle particular tasks. She worries that although people with computers can access Zoom events by phone, they have been very reluctant to do so and might be encouraged if given more confidence. She also hopes that laptops and the like no longer needed by some members of her church community will be given to those without.

Yet many older people in churches and beyond doubt that learning computer skills is worth the puff. How can we convince them? A few suggestions: if someone is unwell or the weather inclement, they can save themselves a trip to the shops by ordering goods online to be delivered on their doorstep. Have you tried to explain your problem on a customer helpline, supposing you can get through? Easier by far to type in questions and respond to answers in a website's chat box. If you live in a village amongst people with whom you sense little in common, switch on your computer and you might find like-minded people living locally perhaps through a Facebook group. Or others living far away whose company you would enjoy: a family carer I know used to play chess from her home in Ramsgate with someone in California. Skype, FaceTime, Google Hangouts and other similar facilities enable us to see and talk to our friends at any time, any place, for free. The screen world offers instant access to information, not least the frequently-changing and complex Covid rules. And it enables everyone to have a voice.

What of the obstacles to engaging with the internet faced by people with disabilities? Well, Microsoft in particular has introduced operational changes to facilitate use of its devices. On any computer you ought to be able to change the size of type on your screen and adjust the colour contrast – if partially-sighted, you might find black type on an orange background easier to decipher. Or you could switch to operating your computer or smartphone by voice instead of with your fingers. The equipment computers use can help too: you can buy a keyboard adapted for sight impairment, with 'monster keys' in bold print or in different colours; while e-books are easier to read than print because you can adjust the font-size and colour contrast.

Some people will never use the internet, by choice or perhaps because of cognitive impairment, and can be greatly disadvantaged as a result. Could a small team of people in

each church with access to computers be on hand to help this group, whether with supermarket orders or to obtain useful information urgently, such as the inspection report of a care home they are being encouraged to move to?

Build back better

Noreena Hertz argues convincingly in her new book *The Lonely Century* that our own times have seen an unprecedented amount of loneliness. One way in which church communities seek to combat social isolation and loneliness in the wider community is through running friendship clubs on their premises. Could some of the activities in them be reset by enlisting the help of the internet? Facilities such as Facebook provide an ideal means of canvassing the views of those within church and the wider community about what they would like. In the past, some church-based social activities have had a slightly lowest-common-denominator feel about them, inducing passivity. New purposeful and fun activities might include discussions about local issues, ceilidhs, and re-enacting pieces of musical theatre after watching them on YouTube. Let's use the miracle of the digital world to help us build back better in as many ways as we can possibly think of.

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