

Part 2

**WHO IS
RESPONDING
AND WHY?**

PART 2: WHO IS RESPONDING AND WHY?

When someone has made a comment or pressed the like button on the Facebook platform you can go to their Facebook Profile by clicking on them, and so you find out something about them. Build up a picture by going through each person new to you in turn. Contact as many people as you can to say hello and how nice it was to see them connect with the church, ask how they are and how the church can help them. There may be so many people to follow up that you will need a team from the church to divide up the names between them.

We have analysed what we know of virtual newcomers to a few services and can see the following categories:

1. Friends and family of church members.
2. Local residents who don't normally come to church, or who used to come.
3. Housebound with a link to the church.
4. Linked by a past event (such as a baptism, wedding, funeral).
5. Used to come to the church, or grew up in it, but have moved away.
6. Occasional churchgoers who have now become regular.
7. Found the church via another (such as a denominational or diocesan) link.
8. Members of another church that is not livestreaming services.
9. No obvious connection but just seem to have joined in.

Examples:

1. Last Sunday I met a friend from church while out on our walks. She was in tears of joy because both her mother and her grown up daughter had responded to her suggestion, watched our livestreamed service and appreciated it. Neither would have countenanced going to a church building for a service.
2. Neighbours of ours who used to come to Messy Church when the children were smaller did the online service and activities, and posted lovely comments. It was as though they had never been away.
3. My friend's mum is too frail to go to church any more but she now joins our livestreaming every week. Church has re-found her. We're still trying to put in a wheelchair ramp at our church. Online is an excellent ramp.
4. I asked our rector about a name I did not recognise from our livestreamed Messy Church. He told me the man's baby daughter had been baptised in the church five years ago.
5. A young man who had grown up in our church, then married, moved away and lost touch with church joined in our Messy Church yesterday, together, I guess with his wife and their toddler.
6. One vicar writes: 'People who only ever turn up at Christingle seem to be watching each Sunday, a baptism

couple who only attend once in a blue moon have commented that this has made them really miss church, one of our recent wedding couples have been watching and commenting.'

7. We registered our Messy-style service with a diocesan link and two families joined us through it.
8. We actually haven't identified anyone clearly in this category, we just suspect there may be a few.
9. There are just a few completely unfamiliar names who have revealed themselves through comments and likes, and we do not know their story.

We have detected the 'bored and worried', the 'how nice to be in touch this way' people and stressed NHS workers all accessing online.

The proportions in each category may well vary between churches but most people seem to be in categories 1-6 with a clear and established link with the church they have chosen. Implications:

1. Simply knowing the names of people joining in may well be enough to enable further contact.
2. The fear that a few large churches with slick online operations will scoop the market is largely unfounded. TV churches have existed for years. People are turning to churches they already know, with which they identify, often local to them. To hear the livestreamer say 'and welcome to John, Elsie's brother', is extremely powerful. People are being spatially distant but they do not want to be socially distant. By and large they are turning to their own church or to the nearest one. And they are turning with the full range of motives, needs and personalities, some looking for community, some for peace, some for God. We need the same sensitivity to individuals that we need on the church door.



3. The fact that most people joining in do so on the basis of a past link with physical church suggests that online church is not that easy to start up from scratch. It is, at the moment, largely dependent on traditional church. If it were easy to start and grow online church there would have been lots around for years now. In the long term, online church is likely to be an extension to the gathered community not a replacement for it.
4. Perhaps the fact that most newcomers may well have been invited by someone is the great new welcoming truth about online church. Our 'Everybody Welcome' training course spends much time on the problem that it is so difficult to invite people to come to church with us. Some Christians never ever invite, perhaps because of fear of rejection, or the embarrassment of it, or lack of confidence in their own church community's ability to welcome the stranger. I for one have invited more people to our online services in the last week than I have to physical church in the last ten years. So this is the great new discovery:

Inviting someone to access an online service is a thousand times easier than inviting them to attend a church building.

Why Are They Accessing Online Church?

Some of the reasons churches have come across:

1. These are unusual times, and people are looking for support, human contact, re-assurance, faith.
2. Many people also have more time on their hands.
3. It seems natural and easy to join online, while scary and unnatural to attend the building.
4. You can access online church without any commitment or anyone else knowing. You will not leave having been put on the flower rota.
5. Some are re-connecting with a community they have lost and miss, either through frailty or moving away.
6. You can access the service at a time to suit yourself – and many are doing so.
7. One previously non-churchgoer said that online she felt comfortable, fully part of the service and so more welcomed than if she had been in the building unsure of how to behave.
8. Most people are not looking for high-quality presentation and high-octane performance-religion. They are looking for a familiar and comforting voice and face. It is okay to keep it simple.
9. Some people find it easier to join a new group than an existing one. At online church at the moment everyone is new.
10. People are being invited to come to church in undreamed of, unprecedented numbers. It is the simplest thing to ask all congregation members on Facebook, Instagram or Snapchat to invite their online 'friends' to view the forthcoming church online service and send them a link. Even casual conversations over the phone with family and

friends, or socially distanced chats on the street with neighbours, turn easily to invitation. Many people have up to now had no church of their own not because they don't want one but because they have never been asked. Now they have been.

One vicar says:

'My immediate reaction to virtual welcome is that online services are accessible, no strings attached, no-one to notice if you "get it wrong" and as such everyone can feel welcome, and able to be a full part of the service. I'm thinking especially of those who don't normally attend, only come when Grandma is staying, misfits, unsure seekers, and those on the periphery who don't receive communion. Online they can really feel part of the service, with all worry about inadequacy, uncertainty gone. Ministering in a small village church, it's obvious who doesn't come up for communion, who doesn't feel entirely part of the "set up", unsure if they belong. I am convinced Christ would have included the outsider, the seeker, the unsure.'

One vicar was stopped on her daily walk by a chap gardening who recognised her from posts and video – he said to keep going because he and his neighbours found them re-assuring and uplifting. She took his contact details and will try to grow the relationship.

We'd especially love to hear more stories of individuals connecting with online church as these develop everyone's human understanding of what is drawing people to church, God and faith at this time.

