



WHAT DO WE MEAN BY HYBRID CHURCH?

Hybrid Church already existed before the pandemic – but it has undoubtedly grown since then. Pete Phillips explains what Hybrid Church is, where it came from and why it's here to stay

Hybrid is a fresh expression of church within digital culture, or within what we might call contemporary networked society. This is a society which values connectivity above geography – meeting up with and sharing life with people they get on with, they are networked with. Hybrid Church is a Christian community (the body of Christ) which seeks to meet both onsite (in a building)

and online either for everything or for distinct parts of their ministry. So even if a local church decides to meet wholly onsite for one service, they might meet hybrid for another service, or for Bible studies or for business meetings. Premier Digital has set out the idea in its Hybrid Church Charter.¹

How Hybrid Church grew during lockdown

The Church's worship and ministry did not cease to exist during the pandemic. We innovated. Through the lockdown, many churches went online and hopefully

realised that lots of churches were there already – especially those associated with the very people who find the restrictions of physical church impossible to cope with – people who are disabled, housebound, or long-term ill. These have always been the pioneers of Hybrid Church – offering something more inclusive, more enabling, more flexible. Hybridity is about ensuring that same inclusive model – allowing people to attend onsite or online in whatever way allows them to be part of the body of Christ.

[Let's reflect on how we got here...](#)

¹ premierdigital.info/charter

From March 2020 when physical buildings were closed for public worship, some local churches moved to livestreaming their worship, perhaps also their discipleship, sometimes even their business meetings. Some preferred Facebook Live or Zoom or Google Meet or even ancient technologies known as Skype or Teams. Others replicated this offline through paper order of service sheets sent to houses, dial-a-sermon offers, or drive-in services in church car parks. Others also provided care for local residents – helping with food provision, meals, prescription pick-up services, mental health advice, or as exercise companions. The Church's ministry became hybrid during the lockdown – meeting the needs of the local community

and sharing the love of God through plural technologies both offline and online.

Why people joined online church

During the lockdowns, we found that a lot of people joined with online church – curious onlookers, seekers, people looking for God in a time of pain, people with time on their hands and looking for new experiences to ease their sense of anxiety, people hunting God. We saw an increase in the number of people looking for online church – and the stats which we will see later were amazing.

But on Google Trends, it was clear people were looking not necessarily for church services – they were looking for prayer, for Jesus, and especially searching for God. We believe in a God who is both engaged in mission himself and who models and propagates the mission of the local church. What seemed to be happening was that God was using the lockdown to engage with lots of new people and lots of new people were reaching out to God. In that context, when the Scottish Government approached ministers of religion, John Drane offered himself for 'spiritual care' – not services, not funerals, just 'spiritual care'.

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He was taken up on the offer within 30 minutes and since then has spoken with over 2000 people exploring spirituality. Time and time again, John says people wanted to talk to him about their sense of the spiritual, their connection with God. God, for them, was so much more important than church.

Hence the numbers – probably 16m new people coming to church online, exploring church online, peeking in to see what we were up to. The stories of people finding God through online church are plentiful. And as we come back from lockdown, we find stories appearing of some of those curious onlookers appearing at onsite services. Secret believers, like Nicodemus, popping their heads around the church door and seeing whether God is at onsite church as they'd found him at online church.

The language of onsite and online – not physical and virtual

Note the language that we are using about hybridity: onsite and online. The two words were proposed by Katie Tupling, Diocesan Advisor on Disability for Oxford Diocese. You see our old language of physical services and virtual services was nonsense really. Any type of service which includes human beings is a physical service. As human beings, we are always, 24/7, 365 days a year, 366 on leap years, physical. We cannot be anything other than physical. From the moment God knit us together in our mother's womb, to the day we die and then, God willing, when we receive our resurrection bodies, we were, are, will be physical. So, for many Zoom services have been an



expression of meeting together ('synagogē'), of real presence: the real presence of others we can talk to, the real presence of the Spirit uniting us across the internet, ministering to us in different locations, bringing words of hope and justice and love to different people in different geographic locations. And being able to have a natter over coffee... or to do a business meeting... or to do a Bible study.

The point of Hybrid Church is not necessarily to promote digital church as the only option

Opening up the Church – with God at the centre

Hybrid Church is about using any technology to welcome as many people as possible whatever their situations into an experience of God within the body of Christ; to diversify our means of engagement in order to incorporate more of the body of Christ – especially those who have historically been marginalised by our focus on building and Sunday mornings. The aim is to open up the Church giving greater access to worship, discipleship, prayer and at all times greater access to God.

But the point of Hybrid Church is not necessarily to promote digital church as the only option. It's one of the big things I learnt during the first lockdown. I asked some friends to write a chapter for my book on Digital Church¹. I thought they were all experts on doing things digitally - but they all talked about the use of lots of different technologies:

Bryony and her paper orders of service going around the village, of her dial-a-sermon service (the only human voice some people heard each week); Matthew doing a rosary pilgrimage into a Maltese village to bring church to village square; and Joanne with her easel at the gate, her labyrinths in the car park and her drive-through communions.

God is at the centre of this. How do we offer people opportunities to encounter the living God? The point is, of course, that the Church isn't just a physical thing. When we join in worship, we share in the worship of heaven - the throne room scenes of Revelation 4-5. We join with the church militant across the whole world, sharing with billions of other Christians worshipping God across the globe. But we also share with those who have gone before and with creation itself giving praise to the creator. All earth and heaven worshipping God. At the breaking of bread at communion this is even more so – as all time and space meets in the one eucharistic moment as we celebrate and remember Christ's death upon the cross. We transcend our physicality and join heaven in adoration of the Lamb. To lock down such a moment to a local celebration in a chapel or church building with a few locals in attendance is to miss the theological point that we as a Church with capital C transcend our locality, transcend our chapels, join with all God's people in that great cloud of witnesses. What an opportunity to make use of every technology we can.

Hybrid Church looking forward

It may be that we gather for worship more in a building

and do more discipleship and business online. Human beings are used to proximal connections – we like being in meetings together. We like hugs and breathing the same air. We like the opportunity to hear each other singing the praises of God and affirming our faith together. We like the opportunity to catch up with one another face-to-face without a screen in between. But we need to remember the whole body of Christ – those who have reasons for not attending in buildings, those who have lost the habit of attending, people with disabilities or long-term illness, those fearful of crowds. Whatever their reasons, these people are cherished members of the body of Christ. We need to make the best use of technology to allow them to be present in our 'building-focussed' worship – remembering that it should be 'God-focussed' worship in buildings!

But Hybrid Church is also about offering a shop window for the Church online.



¹ *Hybrid Church*, published by Grove Books

There are plenty of stories and statistics of many people, not previously regulars at church, who have popped into online worship to see what we do inside our buildings. Whether they are there because they are fearful of the pandemic, or bored in lockdown, or simply curious, we made these people welcome. Some churches have indeed seen remarkable growth through such curious onlookers. Why would we decide after the pandemic to limit their engagement to onsite-only? If they have learnt to enjoy church online, shouldn't we continue to provide that way of engaging rather than expect people to fit our agendas, in our buildings, when we choose to open then? Shouldn't we be making these people more and more welcome?

To maximise the impact of our online engagement, we should be showcasing the brilliant people we have in church, not just mimicking a stage performance showing only the

preacher and the worship group. We should be creating online rituals which allow a depth to our worship rather than a reflection of broadcast entertainment. We should be inviting engagement opportunities for those popping into worship – practical help and wellbeing support via email or phone contacts, invitations to Zoom coffee meetings (or similar), opportunities to meet in a coffee shop after lockdown is lifted, online *Alpha* or prayer courses.

In short, we should be offering Hybrid Church wherever we can. Not replicating everything across all technologies but choosing wisely to use the right tech for the right purpose. I can envisage large services livestreamed, smaller services on Zoom or Facebooklive, business meetings on Zoom or Teams, housegroups on Google Hangouts, prayer groups on Whatsapp or Signal. I think the Hybrid Church is here to stay. It is a mission-centred opportunity for the Church whether pandemics come or go. But this means the Church will need to reinvest in technologists and creatives alongside the clergy – many of whom are exhausted by their efforts. We need to invest in the future, in mission, in providing opportunities for the whole body of Christ to engage alongside those intrigued by the Church and thirsty for an encounter with the living God.

For further reading

Zoom ecclesiology: the Church scattered and gathered - Baptist theologian Paul Fiddes explores the forms covenant, fellowship and body are taking 'virtually' www.baptist.org.uk/zoomecclesiology

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Pete Phillips is a Digital Theology Researcher at Durham University, where he leads the Centre for Digital Theology, and Head of Digital Theology at Premier Media. He is the author of *Hybrid Church: Blending Online and Offline Community* (Grove)

Spurgeon's College has partnered with the Centre for Digital Theology and Premier to offer an MA in Digital Theology, the first degree of its kind across the world, offering a unique opportunity for theological reflection on digitality and its implications for the contemporary church spurgeons.ac.uk/ma-in-digital-theology/