



Discipleship

In a Digital

Community

Simon Werrett is part of two church communities. His local, onsite congregation is Burnham on Crouch Baptist Church in Essex, where he is the community digital pastor. Alongside this he is a leader in Coffee Shop Sunday, a Methodist project which has created an online community principally through Facebook and Zoom

Simon became involved in this latter community after meeting one of its leaders while studying for a postgraduate digital theology diploma at Spurgeon's College. He joined in 2021 as the lockdown restrictions were ending, and has seen firsthand how an online community has met the spiritual needs of both new and experienced Christians.

The project started life in an actual coffee shop in Coventry in 2020, founded by Trevor and Annie Gay and Sue Fry, but migrated online like so many others once the Covid restrictions hit. It has developed a regular pattern of services, teaching times and prayer, so much so there is something every day of the week, including two Zoom gatherings, two Facebook Lives, and recorded Bible readings. Using these, the community has worked through books of the Bible/theological subjects, or concepts like *Methodist Way of Life* or *Baptist Basics*.

There are a number of monthly offerings: an online service, a meditation service, a book club and a deep dive theology session. There are prayer meetings too, depending on people's availability. Simon runs the Facebook Live every Tuesday,

where he offers regular teaching.

He offers several reasons the community continued in the digital space, even after the lockdown restrictions eased.

It draws people from around the world, including Kenya, Australia and the US. Friendships and mutual support networks have developed that couldn't have happened otherwise.

The majority who attend are retired, says Simon, and a good number are active in their local church community. Being part of this initiative is an opportunity for them to simply receive, away from the busyness of their active church roles. "They're always running around organising things, so it's actually quite nice to come, sit and relax."



The timing has an impact too, he continues. "Many of the meetings are at 9pm. People are around. Most of them are thinking of going to bed, so it's a natural time to reflect in the presence of God on the day."

People young in their faith have also been part of the community. Simon says there is an informality to being online - it's much easier for instance to ask a question during a Facebook Live, than interrupt a preacher in an onsite sermon. The accessibility also means people can turn their camera off and just listen.

Participants perhaps have more of a say in the areas taught. "We ask people, 'is there anything you want us to discuss or a book that you want us to go through?', and take that on board." This means there are also

opportunities for people to try things - lead a talk in an area of interest. Interestingly this has had a positive knock-on effect on onsite church life.

"We have seen people who've come here, do something, which then builds them up and gives them confidence to do stuff in their local church - reading the Bible, helping run groups. It's building people up.

"All these factors mean we have been encouraging and developing people on their discipleship journey," Simon continues.

"I think online communities give different opportunities to help people grow their faith in a different way. Depending on the community, there's more engagement.

"It's been a great learning experience for me - an opportunity to share and to develop, and tell people about Jesus."



Simon is currently studying a part time professional doctorate at Chester University. His focus is discipleship in the metaverse, through the use of avatars.