



Information Policy Guidance

Secure online acts of worship and church meetings

It is important to consider the security of your parish's acts of worship and church meetings when delivering them online. Just as you would ensure your church buildings and halls are safe and secure for the purposes for which they are being used, the same is true online; that said we should also ensure that they are places of welcome to newcomers.

Generally speaking, online acts of worship and church meetings will be performed via either a streaming service (e.g. Facebook Live, YouTube) or a video conferencing service (e.g. Zoom, GoToMeeting).

Streaming services

These can either be pre-recorded or live streams and are limited to one-way communication at least as far as the video and audio elements are concerned – as a viewer, you can only interact with what's going on via text comments. Viewers cannot see or speak to other viewers, neither can the presenter see or hear the viewers.

Video conferencing services

These services offer all participants the opportunity to interact with each other via audio and video and require the participant to have joining details such as an ID and password to enter the video conference. Often they allow participants to share what is on their screen with other participants. How many participants can be seen at once is dependent on your screen size and if more than one person talks at once, it is very difficult to make out what is being said.

Considerations for church meetings

In the offline world, meetings such as PCC meetings, house/study groups and prayer meetings are generally by invitation so the same can be applied in the online world. Video conferencing is probably going to be the right solution here because:

- there will be low numbers of people in attendance
- they will all need to be able to interact with each other for the meeting to be effective
- there is no real requirement for the meeting to be open to others outside of the group's membership

Joining details for the meeting can be shared with group members via email so that access to the meeting can be controlled and kept secure.

Considerations for acts of worship

In the offline world, acts of worship are generally open to anyone who wishes to take part or observe so an online act of worship should offer the same. However, it is important to realise that your act of worship could be open to the whole online world and that people often do not feel the same level of inhibition when interacting with others online, particularly strangers.

The first question to ask is: do all the participants in the act of worship actually need to interact with each other?

Thinking about an offline Sunday service, the usual format is that most of the service is presented from the front and most participants simply listen. This therefore lends itself to using a streaming service. As there is a much lower risk of disruption from people outside the core congregation, links to the act of worship can be shared on public websites and social media accounts.

If you feel it is important for the participants of your act of worship to interact with each other, here are a few ways you could achieve this:

Use a video conferencing service and share the joining details on a public website

This is NOT recommended! Anyone who has access to the internet could potentially enter your act of worship and disrupt it. Your only security is removing them from the meeting but by then the damage will have been done.

Use a video conferencing service and share the joining details only with the existing congregation

Also NOT recommended! This is the online equivalent of getting the usual congregation into the church building and then locking the doors – it gives no opportunity for seekers to find God.

Use a video conferencing service but publish an email address that people can contact to request the joining details

This gives you a degree of control over who you allow into the act of worship and gives you the opportunity to find out more about a newcomer beforehand.

Use a streaming service for the act of worship itself but have an invite-only video conference before or after the act of worship

This is the online equivalent of having coffee and biscuits before or after the act of worship and allows congregants to have a time of fellowship as well as meeting to worship.

Breaches of security

If someone gains unauthorised access to your online act of worship or church meeting, use the tools within the streaming or video conferencing service to block that person's access.

If a participant disrupts your online act of worship or church meeting their access should be blocked and, depending on the nature of the disruption, this should be reported to the PCC/Incumbent, Diocesan Safeguarding Advisor and/or Police.

Security tips

You can take additional security precautions in your online acts of worship and church meetings, particularly when using video conferencing services, by:

- Disabling screen sharing for everyone but the host/presenter
- Always using a password as well as a meeting ID to access your events
- Actively admitting people into the online act of worship or church meeting by enabling features such as waiting rooms

Take some time to get to know the features of your streaming or video conferencing service and search online for '[Name of service] security tips'.