

Online church services prove popular with rural congregations during pandemic, new study shows

Online church services have proved popular with rural communities during the pandemic, a new study shows.

Congregations have turned to the internet after coronavirus closed church buildings in March, according to the survey.

Half of those who took part in the research have been live streaming services or using Zoom to worship, with a quarter using Facebook and 40 per cent watching pre-recorded YouTube videos. Before lockdown 95 per cent had attended churches in person.

However some of those who took part in the research thought the response of their local church was overly geared towards the 'elderly congregation', while others thought those who were older or without the internet were not appropriately considered. Some people also felt online resources and activities were not sufficiently engaging

A total of 44 per cent said they had felt well supported by members of their church communities in recent months, and 41 per cent said they felt well supported by their local clergy.

Just under half of respondents - 45 per cent - said they had prayed more during the pandemic, while 35 per cent said they felt closer to their faith, 40 per cent closer to God, 48 per cent closer to family and 39 per cent closer to local communities.

The report, *COVID-19, Christian Faith and Wellbeing*, was prepared for the Arthur Rank Centre by Dr Caroline Nye and Professor Matt Lobley from the Centre for Rural Policy Research at the University of Exeter.

The online survey, of 288 people who were members of the Arthur Rank Centre's community network and who followed their social media networks, ran for three weeks between August and September. The majority of respondents were over 55 and half reported living in a village, with 23 per cent living in urban areas, 23 per cent living in small towns and 4 per cent in more remote locations.

A quarter of respondents said they felt more lonely because of the pandemic – the majority of this only mildly - while 14 per cent said they had felt less lonely in recent months.

Dr Nye said: "The most common reason given for developing a closer relationship with faith during the coronavirus outbreak was the increased availability of time and space in people's lives. Technology, physical isolation and the harsh reality of COVID-19 stimulated a deepening of faith, and some respondents said their trust in God had been strengthened during the outbreak.

"For those who declared feeling further from their faith, the principal reason provided was isolation from friends, family, and the church community. While many embraced the use of technology for worship and community connection, others found it inaccessible and clunky, stating that it enhanced their experience of feeling 'separated'."

One respondent said: "I have loved zoom church. Seeing people's faces; the equality where we're all reduced to a square on a screen. The power of zoom to bring together parishioners from a [large]

parish benefice; the simplicity of being able to worship from home and the opportunity for different types of worship.”

Another respondent said: “The services I did attend on zoom seemed to be exactly the same as they were previously in church - for me it felt like it was going through the motions without real connection. I did not find comfort or hope there.”

A total of 24.5 per cent said their church social events such as Bible study groups, coffee gatherings, home groups, quizzes, social meetings, and fellowship groups had continued on Zoom, and of this 24.5 per cent 82 per cent had attended these virtual events. Others had used WhatsApp groups, a phone call support system, socially distanced outdoor meet ups, virtual pub evenings, and newsletters.

With regards to safety, in interviews many respondents mentioned the need for time, reassurance, and suitable risk assessments being carried out, before they would consider returning physically to their church. Older and more vulnerable respondents were more nervous, and some said they would not return at all until an effective vaccine is in place. Others regarded new restrictions and rules as an imposition by some, especially the ban on singing.

The Arthur Rank Centre provides resources for rural Christians and churches, with a specific emphasis on being ‘Together Apart’ during the COVID-19 pandemic. This research will feed into their current response to the pandemic, inform efforts to re-engage people with their faiths, and assist in preparations for any potentially similar outbreaks in the future. The report is being shared with church leaders around the country.