

## How did a range of churches meet the challenge of church on Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2020?

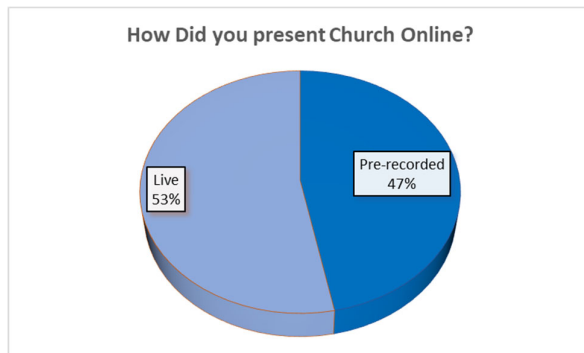
On Sunday March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2020 churches across Australia were unable to meet together in usual church services due the risk of COVID-19 and the commitment made to our government and our people to protect against community infection. The day after this first Partners in Ministry invited Senior Pastors to respond to a survey providing feedback regarding how the weekend went.

Our aim was to assist Pastors in reflecting on the weekend and to share information so that we might share experience and learn from each other.

The following is our collation of this feedback

### What did your church do over the weekend?

Of those who responded to our survey. Almost all churches provided a version of an online service. Whilst there is a wide variety of approaches to achieving this, it is wonderful to learn that almost every pastor surveyed indicated they felt their church meeting was **well received**.



Two general approaches have been used this first weekend:

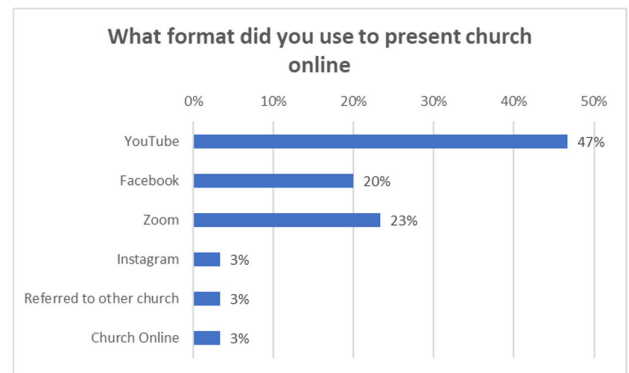
- A '**live version**' of a church meeting – in which the service was conducted live, streamed by the internet; or
- A **pre-recorded version** of the church meeting which is then made available online. In some cases, these were made available either at the usual time of meeting or made available permanently.

A range of formats were used by churches, with YouTube being the most common (see figure below). Some churches used a variety of **platforms** according to the demographic who the meeting is targeting eg Instagram for youth.

Mostly the **venue** chosen for filming was either 'in situ' at the church encouraging familiarity with what is normal on Sundays, or was in a more relaxed setting (eg 'from my couch to your couch'). According to feedback both seemed to work well.

Generally, these meetings included a **range of elements** which might be common in an average church service such as:

- Welcome / explanation
- Readings
- Sermon / Talk
- Prayers
- Children's talk
- Testimonies / interviews
- Music
- Q&A



There is a feeling that 'seeing our pastor' on the screen is more helpful for the church community than linking to a 'celebrity pastor'. Indeed, many churches took the opportunity to include multiple leaders and lay members to build the community feel. Having said this, a couple of churches had visiting speakers for the day (eg Bishop, College Principal etc) and those respondents felt that this was positive – demonstrating that 'our church is part of a larger church' (we are not on our own).

In the feedback there is a high level of discussion regarding the importance of '**community**' and the online church service. For some this is noted as a drawback with the pre-recorded service, however a large number of churches have accommodated for this (or plan to accommodate for this in the next few weeks), by enabling a question and answer time, facilitating group discussion, or breaking into smaller online groups after the initial online 'meeting'. The platforms Zoom, YouTube questions, SMS and Facebook were most mentioned – however a couple mentioned that You Tube questions can be distracting during the talk. Some churches encouraged members to join face to face in smaller groups to worship together (NB this is now not recommended) and others encouraged connection by making phone calls immediately following the meeting. The telephone was encouraged particularly in congregations that needed to reach the elderly.

A number of respondents highlighted the use of Zoom breakout rooms or similar for smaller online groups (eg small groups, kids church whilst the adults listen to the main talk etc).

For a large number of churches **Children's Ministry** online was 'one step too far' for their first week with many indicating that this was an addition they would like to make in subsequent weeks (bearing in mind safe ministry obligations). Those who did do kids ministry included kids talks, separate online programs and a couple tried breakout groups. Some provided kids links and resources for download and a couple encouraged children to use their Lego to complete a diorama of the kids talk.

It is interesting to hear that many ministers believed that their **older congregants** were able to join into the online service with the help of parishioners or staff. Having said that it is recognised that additional thought is needed on catering to our elderly brothers and sisters. A range of options were provided including DVDs or audio (mailed or hand delivered), service sheets and sermon sheets and even phoning members up individually. It seems that for many of our elderly the phone may be an important tool (see note at bottom of this report regarding Zoom dial up)

We recommend that if you wish to learn more about what churches are doing, you visit a few church websites and see what others have done. If you like more information on any of these platforms Partners in Ministry is happy to refer you to someone who can assist.

**Music** – appeared to be a more challenging area over the weekend, mostly due to organisational effort and licensing arrangements. Some have indicated that live music may even emphasize the level of

disconnectedness – and so recommend only pre-recorded music. Having said this, where music was included there were four main approaches:

- Live streamed music or prerecorded – provided with the encouragement to have members listen or sing along. When performing music some mentioned that Sovereign Grace, Emu music and Colin Buchanan had made allowances for intellectual property related to streaming (please check this before acting on it) and that there are plenty of songs in the ‘public domain’.
- A few churches provided links to songs (with words) on You tube which they encouraged people to sing along to or listen to.

A significant number mentioned that there were a number of ‘visitors’ at the online services. Some visitors came online due to churches advertising their online presence to the community, others were spouses who don’t normally attend (but were willing to join from their couch), and others were regulars we hadn’t seen before. (Who knows – maybe people who are irregular attenders will come more often to the online form?)

- How do we invite our community to church or how might we help our members to invite their neighbours to church in this form?
- How do we create an ‘open door’ for visitors, make them feel welcome?
- How do we follow up these visitors?

### What would you do differently?

Almost all respondents were pleased with how their services went on the weekend. Despite this, many highlighted they might add to it (mostly the addition of components described above) or seek to make it simpler for sustainability purposes. A number of respondents indicated a desire to **increase connectivity** whether that be in a live streamed situation or at the conclusion of a pre-recorded viewing.

We note that this is a new medium for many churches and so it may not be helpful to “just try to replicate what we do on Sunday”. **We strongly encourage you to consider what the purpose of your church meeting is and then consider how you might best use the mediums you have available to achieve that purpose.**

For some they were mindful that liturgy needed to be addressed better.

Given the wide variety of technology and capability it is not surprising to see a large range of technical improvements that respondents highlighted. They included:

Lighting	Better equipment (however we are impressed with the quality some achieved with a simple smartphone & microphone)	Use of make up (avoid washed out faces)
Better editing	Overlay of text or picture / graphics (eg scriptures)	Use of music
Songs and words facilitated	Better delivery – sermon	Better delivery – music
Provide print outs	Discussion / engagement	Colours / backdrop
Be more mindful of social distancing in recording	Not use live chat methods during talk (some – distraction)	Include more people / community
Make technology simpler	Systematise production	Adapt format to engage more

In short, whilst there was significant stress for many people to make church available online, it is very encouraging to read the feedback. Here are a few quotes:

- *Feedback was extremely positive - it worked, people said it felt like church, people tuned in who haven't been to church for months*
- *I think/hope it was encouraging for people to be able to continue to worship God together (albeit virtually); to see 'church' still happening (in the midst of all the other uncertainties in their lives) and the opportunity it gave us (and other churches) to hopefully connect with people who may not be able to get to church or otherwise wouldn't come into a church.*
- *We had feedback that the husband (who never attends church) of one of our ladies sat and watched it with him.*
- *I'm pretty sure it reached more people than a regular service. Had people take part who haven't come all year, and some people unknown to us.*
- *We loved people gathering in small groups (in person and online) for shared sense of fellowship and churching together and people sharing selfies of them churching on our private FB page to give shared sense of community*
- *Zoom offered us the ability to connect, not just consume church. People shared prayer points, we had an interview with a couple who were self-isolating and some great engagement from kids using the zoom whiteboard*
- *As we planned to move online, we wanted to prioritise and preserve 'participation' and 'one another' aspect of ministry as much as we could. Zoom's breakout function and video of all the participants enabled us to do that to the best of our ability.*
- *The sermon could be broken up by questions at strategic points to keep people engaged.*
- *130 people were watching the entire package live, with future 'clicks to play' at around 570. People engaged well in this format (around 90 comments) and there was a general buzz during the broadcast.*

### **Are you planning to do anything to serve or support your church community in the coming weeks?**

As already described many pastors will make amendments and additions to what they planned for the previous weekend, however several additional plans are worth noting.

It clear that a key priority in the next week is to **make sure the church database is up to date**. Many ministry leaders will be on the phone to ensure these are correct.

It is clear that leaders need to lead at these times and build trust. Most churches have recognised the need to **communicate at a high level and pray**. This is a key task for ministry staff or lay leaders through a range of mediums – but particularly with written communication and the phone for isolated or older members. If not already in place many churches are utilising messaging apps and prayer apps to help smaller groups stay in regular contact and communication. Some ministers have committed to providing regular emails, messages, videos etc to keep people informed at a corporate level and to encourage communication at a network level. One church has asked their children's ministry leaders to phone families in their care to check in and encourage the family

ESL **online** and **small groups online** (using a range of platforms) has been very well accepted however most churches will experience these more regularly from this week. For many they will convert their youth and children's groups to this method in the coming week.

Encouragement through the week – several churches indicated that they are seeking to encourage members through the week with **short bible passages, thoughts for the day or devotions**. Some have started to post short devotional videos online from pastors or a church member to encourage devotions. It is wonderful to hear some churches will use this period to try to re-establish **family devotionals** within church families and so are providing resources to support this.

We are aware that the NCLS is preparing a short rapid response online survey for churches to send to their members. This will enable a church leader to quickly understand how their church members are travelling and provide a prompt for whether things need to adapt or continue as planned.

### Are you planning to do anything to show the love of Christ or to bring the good news of Christ to your local community or suburb?

It is wonderful to hear the immense confidence and hope in the Gospel as churches prepare for the next few weeks. As a community we genuinely acknowledge that God will use our churches to shine the light of the Gospel into our communities at this difficult time. Many churches are brainstorming how they might reach their suburb however some churches indicated they were already in prayer and at work. Here are a few ways this is planned at the moment:

The most obvious step is to **advertise** the online church services – either on the church sign or with specially designed signs or banners, letter box drops (several mentioned that there are many students available to deliver these) and, of course, on the front page of the church web site. Having advertised the online service we must expect that they will come and prepare how we will welcome, engage and love them.

Not all of us can ring our **church bells**, but a number of churches across Sydney and the Illawarra will ring their church bells at 12pm and pray on their stairs. This has attracted very positive media attention and is a wonderful witness and call to the community.

Many pastors mentioned that they were encouraging their members to **reach out to their neighbours** – especially those who are elderly or self-isolating. One pastor dropped leaflets for his neighbours along with a word of encouragement and two rolls of toilet paper!

A number of churches are taking advantage of the “**#virtualkindness**” card provided by Virtual Church Assist for free. This card will be given to neighbours by church members with a message of love and offering care (see <https://www.virtualchurchassist.com/viralkindness>).



Speaking of toilet paper, it is interesting to see a number of churches seeking to order “who gives a crap?” toilet paper to use along with their missional plans.

More conventional plans include running **Christianity courses** online – noting a couple of the mainstream courses provide very good online content. We are aware that church registrations for Alpha online have significantly increased just in the last week.

NB Two online versions we are aware many churches are accessing or referring people to are:

- **Alpha Online** - <https://www.alpha.org/alpha-online/> - Training is available please contact - [philippa.fielding@alpha.org.au](mailto:philippa.fielding@alpha.org.au) to get started
- **Christianity Explored** - [https://www.ceministries.org/Articles/569879/Blog/Sharing\\_the\\_gospel\\_in\\_a.aspx](https://www.ceministries.org/Articles/569879/Blog/Sharing_the_gospel_in_a.aspx)

Several churches who utilise the mobile **food pantries** recognise the opportunity for this at this time and a couple of churches mentioned providing a ‘church pantry’ for members or the community to share goods that they have available.

Many churches support **nursing homes** and wish to be able to serve into nursing homes. Whilst this is not possible due to isolation requirements, they are exploring ways to provide services (on paper, on audio, DVD

or on video) or provisions to residents. One pastor has provided a 2-3 minute video talk that the staff are willing to run in lieu of a face to face service.

We are aware that the NCLS is preparing a short **online survey** for churches to send to those outside the church whom they have contact with eg rent their facilities. This will enable churches to think missionally about their broader community during this time. How could they serve them or what opportunities are there to bring Christ's love to their community at this time?

## Key Issues

As we collate this feedback, we see some hard questions we think are worth considering. (NB These may be more worthwhile asking in coming weeks as you settle into more of a routine):

- **Leadership** – it is clear that people will look for clear leadership at this time. Rather than being reactive leaders will need to be on the front foot and make it clear that our mission hasn't changed, our method does.
  - Leaders will need to communicate regularly and ensure that there is strong alignment i.e. alignment with new legislation and alignment across all leaders in the church.
  - Leaders must recognise how disenfranchising it is as a 'second in charge' or a lay leader when you do not know what to say or behave. Strong leaders will enable other leaders to act and prioritise communication to equip these people to be able to talk to others with confidence.
  - Leaders should also be mindful of keeping 'the main game the main game'. We suggest leaders keep a strong focus on discipleship over this period and ask "how will this method reinforce or equip people to grow as disciples or make disciples". Doing this well will lead to a legacy in the church culture over the longer term.
- **Sustainability** – enormous effort has been made to achieve an online based method and we know that we may not be able to meet face to face for some months. Leaders will need to consider how sustainable this approach and other efforts are. A couple of questions to ask might be:
  - How can our lay leaders or members do this? We strongly suggest you begin involving members in the effort.
  - What would happen if my online platform fails? Consider that some of the platforms have policies which may mean that accounts are closed in certain situations. What would be the implication if you couldn't use this platform?
  - If ministry staff become diverted by the need for serious pastoral care due to the human impact of COVID-19 (eg financial problems, serious health issues or even deaths) how will the programs you have instituted be sustained / implemented?
- **Community** – beyond running a church service a key risk for the church is community of the church.
  - How will we create an environment and equip or encourage our lay leaders to build connectivity and care for those who are isolated?
- **Mission** – this is clearly an opportunity for the church to embrace new people and to demonstrate the love of Christ to our community.
  - How will you identify, welcome and embrace new people?
  - How will you equip and encourage the saints to serve their community and share the good news and love of Christ?
- **Financial** – We encourage churches to be watching for the financial consequences of lost employment, rental income, or giving and looking for early warning signs. With this in mind we recommend you be prepared for challenges by doing some scenario planning? We recognise that this may sound extremely negative, however we believe this type of scenario planning will be helpful. For example, what will you do if your revenue drops 30%?

- How much of your church budget is dependent on cash offering, rental income or other income that may be impacted by not meeting or loss of jobs?

Friends we are very grateful for the feedback we have received. We hope that you find this collation of feedback helpful.

Please know that all of us at Partners in Ministry are thankful for you and your role and we are praying for you as you serve our Lord Jesus and His church. We are praying for your safety and your faith, and that the Gospel of our Lord will flourish even as our nation faces a very tough period in its short history.

If we can help you at all or you would like to chat with us or have us pray with you, please don't hesitate to contact us on [info@partnersinministry.com](mailto:info@partnersinministry.com) or through our website at [www.partnersinministry.com](http://www.partnersinministry.com).