

Online church – what next?

With restrictions lifting, and church buildings now open again, how has Covid-19 affected **Oadby Baptist Church's** online services? Interview with Tom Cox



Oadby Baptist Church is in a similar position to many. At the outset of the pandemic it began livestreaming its services, and has continued to do so ever since. With restrictions officially ending in July (and the Government keen they don't return), there's much to consider about the next phase of life. How is the church approaching the future?

"Covid doesn't end when restrictions end," minister Tom Cox said. "There remains a lot to consider and it's the same for churches – things have changed. It takes time to establish rhythms and routines. The shock of coming back into the building is very real. We have to relearn how to live again."

The church decided to livestream to foster a sense of togetherness at a time of great uncertainty. "The big message was: we are doing this together, everyone is going to join at the same time. We don't want the church to be a social club – church needs to be more life-giving – but we recognise Sunday is an anchor for many."

The church has adapted its services so they work better online. The pace and content mix of the services changed – fewer songs, for instance, while liturgical prayer with its call and response seemed to be appreciated.

Tom stresses, "Oadby is not a 'techy church' – things have gone wrong, or haven't worked. As time went on it was harder and harder to keep the excitement of online". Nevertheless, the church has recognised the value of livestreaming, and has made the decision to continue. Whereas previously it used to record services almost as an afterthought, now it uses three cameras compared to one, with improved lighting, a couple of new screens and new worship presentation software. This financial investment of its limited resources was made in discussion with the leadership team and church membership.

One reason to continue is the increased reach. As with many churches, being online has piqued the interest of those who wouldn't have physically visited on a Sunday. Tom feels like it's taken the doors of the church closer to people's homes.

"We've not done anything like *Alpha* or an Enquirers' course – but missionally it's brought the church closer, especially for those who wanted to explore faith, or wanted to find some hope and comfort in strange and uncertain

times. Through moving online, we have made it easier and accessible."

But, he adds, this raises questions about what happens next. "So, we've moved the doors of church, but do we leave it there? Is there that strategic step to say "that's stage one". If so, what's stage two?"

There have been 'interesting conversations about mundane stuff' – such as where to put the cameras. With only 30 in the building in spring and summer, one camera was placed in the middle of the room to represent people at home. But in time it will probably move. What will the service look like when more people are in the building than at home? And just getting to that place is a big step for many.

"The social anxiety is a real issue," says Tom. "At what point do we actively encourage people to come back into the building? Are we happy that some people are staying at home? What are their reasons – is it anxiety – or is it because it's easier?"

"We don't have the answers – these are some of the questions," he continues. "To some extent it's about being open and vulnerable."

"But we hope and trust in Jesus. And as a church we provide a sense of hope and comfort, both to our congregation and the wider community."