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Title	Church in the Digital Age Follow-up Report to Assembly Standing Committee
Type of Paper	For Information
Assembly or ASC Minute	ASC Minutes 23.08.02 & 23.08.03
Consultation	Transforming Worship Advocate, Discipling the Next Generation Advocate
Purpose	To provide the ASC with a follow-up concerning learnings from the ongoing use of digital and hybrid settings for worship and in communications and community building.
Rationale & Findings Summary	
Attachments	None
Proposals	That the Assembly Standing Committee: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Receive the report2. Note the recommendations for action contained in the report and request the Associate General Secretary to facilitate these actions.
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Church in the Digital Age Follow-up Report to Assembly Standing Committee

Introduction

In March 2023, following the reception of the report from the Church in the Digital Age Task Group, the ASC determined to follow this report up with three referrals:

In order further to equip the Uniting Church in its worship, witness and service in a digital age,

- (i) request the Advocate and Panel of Transforming Worship to report to the Associate General Secretary on any learnings coming from the ongoing use of digital and hybrid settings for worship across the Church for incorporation into a report to the November 2023 meeting of the Assembly Standing Committee;
- (ii) request the Advocate and Panel of Discipling the Next Generation to report to the Associate General Secretary on any learnings coming from the ongoing use of digital platforms by emerging generations, for incorporation into a report to the November 2023 meeting of the Assembly Standing Committee; and

This report covers these two referrals. It is based on feedback from each of the Circle Advocates (Jon Humphries and Virginia Lavaki respectively), along with the Younger Generations (Digital and New Communities) worker from Vic/Tas Synod (Kelly Skilton).

The primary focus of the input from the Transforming Worship Circle concerned the use of online and hybrid gathering specifically for worship, whereas the input from the Discipling the Next Generation Circle focussed much more on the use of digital platforms for community building.

Key Takeaways and Recommendations

While the full list of learnings can be found below, here are some summarised key points and recommendations arising from my consultation with the two Circles:

- 1. Provision of education and resourcing for the use of technology is a significant need for the Church and will have a big effect on the effectiveness of both online and hybrid worship and community building.**
- 2. Better pathways for sharing learning, understanding and outcomes of experimentation across the silos of Congregations, Presbyteries and Synods is vital.**
- 3. Technology needs to be considered in the light of clear missional goals.**
- 4. Flexibility of implementation and oversight and ability to respond to new digital technology, platforms and culture with agility is vital.**
- 5. Clear understanding of the aspects of digital safety is paramount.**

Recommendations for action:

This report should be passed to the ACT2 team for consideration within Workstreams 1 (Local Communities of Faith and Discipleship) and Workstream 3 (Governance and Resourcing).

Similarly, the ACT2 unit should be encouraged to consider the NSW.ACT Synod Report "Toward a Blended Ecology" and its supporting document, especially the section related to Faith Communities, which covers similar ground in terms of flexibility and agility in the support and oversight of Faith Communities.

The National Safe Church Unit should be encouraged to gain a copy of the guidelines for online safety generated by the Vic/Tas Digital and New Communities worker and currently being considered by the Vic/Tas People and Culture unit, and to consider whether these guidelines might be able to be shared nationally.

Learnings from the use of online and hybrid settings for Worship

- While many congregations used fully online and then hybrid settings for worship during the most severe parts of the COVID pandemic, there has been some 'fall-off' as the pandemic has eased and restrictions have been lifted.
- At this time, it seems clear that well-resourced congregations are the ones most likely to have continued putting significant resources into online and hybrid worship engagement and are seeing the clearest fruits of this engagement.
- One aspect of this seems to be simply that those who have invested more heavily in technical equipment are more motivated to continue using it.
- A clear benefit of the shift to digital presence through the pandemic is a greater presence of many congregations with updated websites, social media presences.
- Digital forms of worship continue to have a place in connecting with people with health or mobility issues, as well as those who may be travelling or who have difficulty getting themselves (and their families) to a physical worship space.
- The flip side of the coin is that online connection can also provide an excuse not to make the effort to attend physically. This can lead to a consumer mentality, or in some cases, a gradual withdrawal from engagement with the worshipping community.
- A very clear learning is that simply recording a service and making this available for streaming or download, while perhaps useful for 'shut-ins' or those with temporary illness, is unlikely to result in new connections or increased engagement of those on the fringe.
- One exception to this may be where minority groups (eg. LGBTQIA+ people) who are cautious about attending a church may find that attending or watching online provides a safe way of 'testing the vibe' before attending on site.
- A suite of online responses is needed, including online services, informative websites, Facebook or other groups – both public groups and private groups for members. The aim is to encourage community engagement beyond simply 'attending' online or watching a service at a later time.
- Some congregations are experimenting with devotional content being made available through podcasts, Instagram, TikTok and Twitch, and are finding that these platforms enable a much geographically wider audience to connect.
- These different platforms seem to also offer the possibility of connecting in ways which are not just about worship, but more general discipleship training and encouragement, and also the important focus on well-being and mindfulness. Similarly the use of an ever-increasing number of apps providing meditation, lectio divina, reflections on the lectionary etc. can be part of a rounded digital approach to connection.
- Engaging with these different platforms may require also considering new funding models, maybe even including monetisation through established channels related to the different platforms (eg. Youtube monetisation, patreon accounts, paid apps, digital tithing).
- Some congregations have experimented with having online 'hosts' who engage in friendly chat with online attenders, encourage those online to add comments regarding where they are attending from, short responses to the message, and to share prayer points which will be read out live in the service.
- Genuine engagement with online participants may also require the use of new technologies for encouraging engagement during online gatherings, eg. Mentimeter, cahoots. Some of these, for example Menti, allow both online and on site participants to engage in answering digital questions or commenting, with results shared both for those onsite and those online.

- Some parts of the UCA have a theology which seems overly focussed on worship, which then lends itself to the kind of consumeristic consumption of online/recorded worship. When we focus on worship, witness and service being intertwined elements of our discipleship, it becomes evident that a more thorough engagement of those who are connecting digitally is required.
- One aspect of online connection which seems to have quickly disappeared as lockdowns have been lifted is the online after church ('morning tea') gatherings which some congregations ran during COVID. The difficulties involved in somehow including online attenders while those who are onsite are mingling face to face seem to be too great. Generally live streaming simply ceases after the service end. In some congregations, the worship leader might specifically spend a few minutes chatting to online attenders before they are farewelled.
- An area where we have much still to learn is in monitoring and evaluating our online and hybrid offerings – are they connecting effectively? Who are they connecting with?
- A key factor in enabling the strategic use of online and hybrid settings concerns a clear understanding of our missional strategy, thus enabling us to find the most appropriate tools to enable genuine connection and engagement. We need to make strategic choices, as different platforms feel more natural to different constituencies, and everyone seems to be suffering from 'platform fatigue'.
- An important consideration is that our current structural 'silos' mean that sharing new learning and the results of experiments between different congregations, presbyteries and synods is patchy at best.

Learnings from the use of online platforms for community building

- One key learning is that everyone is still learning how to do things the most effectively online, even younger people.
- The people who are most passionate about 'online ministry' are older generations who see this as the key to connecting with younger generations. For younger generations, online presence is not a specific 'thing' but simply part of how they live their life.
- As a result, younger people don't tend to use technology as a way to specifically "do fellowship" but rather as an innate part of life.
- Digital technology is not only vital in maintaining relationships and networking with family and friends but it is also a key way of meeting new friends, starting romantic relationships and dating.
- One of the key issues is that in contrast, many congregations think that online engagement is secondary, or is way to lead people to onsite attendance.
- Instead we need to recognise that for some (many?) younger people online engagement is their primary relationship space! We need to be intentionally online and fostering intentionally online communities.
- It's important to note the changing in digital culture is even faster than other changes between generations. Gen Z are significantly different from Millennials. Ways of using and responding to technology are out of date in 5-10 years.
- At the moment, a key focus is enabling Millennials to engage with the changes in technology and usage since they were younger.
- So one of the key needs is for education, enabling digital competency and understanding before worrying about community building.
- It's important to recognise that while digital engagement is very natural for younger generations, hybrid contexts are really exhausting. Through COVID this was a key learning from schools etc. Mixing two very different things together is never going to be easy.

- To use Hybrid platforms effectively there needs to be a separate and intentional focussing on the online and onsite groups, so that it is an equitable (not necessarily equivalent) experience for both groups.
- There is added difficulty in engaging with digital spaces in the light of intercultural/intergenerational dynamics and boundary crossing. Lots of 'first generation' people are still learning to use technology and its use is a burden rather than necessarily an opportunity for a shared family event.
- It's also important to note that while smart phones are ubiquitous, home internet is in many cases a luxury, so the kind of 'household' approaches to digital connections used by some churches can be a barrier.
- However, note that those with families overseas may also use digital tools naturally. A key learning from these contexts is the importance of face to face (digital) contact rather than simply text or phone.
- Numbers of online attenders, especially in CALD communities fell off soon after the initial COVID response. Cultural pressures can lead to people connecting on Zoom but without showing video, and without actively attending to the online content, just in order to be seen to 'be there'!
- A key issue which is not at this time resolved is concerning how appropriate oversight is performed for online communities which may span Presbyteries, Synods or indeed countries!

Issues of Online Safety

- A key issue for online communities is ensuring safety. Note however that this is critical in all forums whether digital or not. Non digital natives may perceive online spaces as being more risky, but it is equally possible to hide your identity or to make connection with people for the purposes of grooming in physical face to face settings as in online settings. Fear of the unknown plays a part here in the perceptions of older people unused to digital spaces.
- The Church needs to take a lead in providing for the safety of young people engaged in our digital forums, as their parents may not have the digital education necessary to Safety of younger people given that parents may not have the education to protect children.
- Having said that, the responsibility of a person overseeing a digital space can only be for the safety of people while in that digital space. For example, if a child is using their internet connection to engage in a digital space run by the Church, but is simultaneously using their browser to access inappropriate material, the person in charge of the Church space has no access to what other things the child is doing. Parents still have the ultimate responsibility to ensure that children are engaging in appropriate online behaviours within their home.
- Online spaces should be treated in the same way we would treat people in a onsite situation (eg. a room). That is, we should have at least two leaders, appropriate gender balance, stated transparent principles for behaviour etc.
- Church workers or volunteers need to be aware of their own digital competency and not operate outside their competence, any more than we would do so in other areas of competence.
- An interesting point of view comes from LGBTIQ+ community members and also people with visible disabilities, where members of these communities often express feeling safer and more able to be freely themselves in online settings as opposed to physical face to face settings.
- One of the key tools for safety in online environments is that administrators have the ability to quickly and immediately 'boot' someone who is speaking inappropriately or making the environment unsafe. This can happen quickly and without any of the negotiation, argument or even calling the police, which might be necessary in a physical face to face forum.
- Safety must always be considered contextually and with regard to the age and agency of the people involved.