

Connecting the Community: Answered Prayers Help St Ninian's, Prestwick Meet Over Zoom

The Rev Canon Jane Ross, Rector of St Ninian's, Prestwick, writes about the experience of her congregation of using Zoom during the pandemic and enabling people who were previously not online to join in.

At St Ninian's, Prestwick, we have been worshipping together over Zoom since the very beginning of lockdown.

Fortunately, all but five of the congregation were in a position to access Zoom but we worried about those five. Receiving information on bits of paper instead (however well-meant), and not seeing their friends was hard for them and not in alignment with our ethos of inclusivity. We became more and more uncomfortable about the situation so we did what we usually do when facing a problem; we prayed.

The solution then came to us! We would purchase some cheap tablets with phone cards and headphones. These could enable access to Zoom in houses without Wi-Fi or even in care homes or hospitals. For around £500 in total, the purchase of five kits was made. The data bought at this stage allowed approximately six months of connectivity to all the church Zoom activities which have evolved as a response to need: weekly Zoom services, Zoom discipleship group, Zoom prayer group and the monthly Zoom social night. Top up mobile data is a very small recurring cost which the church will cover as long as people need us to 'Zoom'. We received some donations from the congregation to support bringing all our people online so the costs were covered—more answered prayer!

Our in-house expertise enabled an App to be written which basically places a button for each activity on the tablet dashboard. When selected, the button takes the user right into the chosen Zoom activity. We then began to roll out the kit along with training. These users had no experience of computers or smartphones which is why we simplified the interface to get into Zoom.

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~~We have three people whose job it is to train and support the new users. All this took a couple of months to organise which was frustrating but when the first user, Mary, (well into her 90s, pictured)~~ was able to join by video and not just over the phone, it was all worth it. The spontaneous delight bursting from her when she saw the faces of her worshipping community and the laughter and smiles reflected back was a joy and privilege to see.

We employ break-out groups for socialising so this precious fellowship continues after the service. We are now embarking on getting the final person online. Unfortunately, regulations limiting the number of households in a house and visiting in care homes has slowed progress but we are determined to keep moving forward. Yes, training takes longer than you might expect but you cannot take shortcuts: we find it is important to have lots of practice sessions and confidence-building interaction before a new user is ready to access Zoom activities on their own from their home. If a small and financially challenged church like St Ninian's, Prestwick can manage this, then it is possible for anyone—provided everything is undergirded with prayer!