EASTER CHURCH ATTENDANCE 2019 AND 2022 PATTERNS AND TRENDS

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June 2022

Summary

- Onsite attendance at Easter 2022 was 75% of that at Easter 2019 and even down on where we think it would have been if previous decline had continued. There is no room for complacency.
- Onsite recovery was stronger in smaller churches than larger ones. Leaders of large churches should be consulted on whether they recognise this challenge or whether the Easter statistics were a blip of some sort – and then supported in working out how to respond and grow in the future.
- Recovery was very variable Many churches saw dramatic falls in attendance Easter 2022, others had far more people than in 2019. Decline was not inevitable. Some churches showed that it is possible to grow congregations post-Covid, and it is possible that onsite numbers will increase further by October once the threat of Covid has reduced further. We do not yet know whether some churches' attendance was dramatically lower because their congregation are late returning in person or because people have left the church. There will be lessons to be learned from those churches that appear to have increased their attendance since 2019.
- It was always likely that the shock of Covid lockdowns would be a blow to all churches but an opportunity to some. Easter attendance is just one day so it is possible that for a church there will be bigger year to year variations in this measure than in, for example, Usual Sunday Attendance or the size of the Worshipping Community.
- In October 2021, 57% of churches in the four dioceses included in this report reported having a Church at Home (CAH) offering (2021 Statistics for Mission returns) and 44% of churches reported some CAH at Easter 2022. So, about 13% of all churches had stopped offering CAH between October 2021 and Easter 2022. Almost all the CAH offerings at Easter 2022 were online and most of those used YouTube.
- Online added an estimated 36% to the attendance of churches offering it. Their estimated total attendance at Easter 2022, including online, was 101% of 2019.
- In addition, there was substantial online attendance at a small number of churches with a substantial national reach, of which Canterbury Cathedral and Holy Trinity Brompton were the biggest. This probably pushed 2022 numbers up to a slightly higher total than 2019
- Churches without CAH did not have a better recovery in onsite attendance than those with CAH. CAH attendance looks extra to onsite, not an alternative. It was only the churches without CAH that, as a group, saw a drop in total attendance over 2019. This finding should be a call to some churches to reconsider their decisions to stop their CAH offerings. We do recognise, however, that offering CAH is not the right path for some churches. Doing CAH may mean not doing something else, and churches must have the ability to prioritise appropriately for their context. Online looks here to stay, both as part of the ministry of local parish churches and as part of the ministry of large churches with an area, national or international reach.
- The 50% response rate on the first time of collecting Easter figures in this way, suggests that asking churches to fill in 'Statistics for Mission' segments early is something that works. The October count could give solid information on progress between Easter and October.



Produced in association with CPAS, <u>www.cpas.org.uk</u>.

Background

In February and early March 2022, it appeared that Easter 2022 would just about mark the end both of Covid restrictions and of Covid-induced reluctance to attend church services. Easter 2022 would be the first festival for over two years when people could return freely to their churches in person. So, we thought it would be helpful and interesting to ask churches to record their Easter attendances immediately without waiting until early 2023. This would mean that dioceses would know their Easter figures within a few weeks instead of having to wait over a year and could assess what help their churches might need as people return to their church buildings. Four dioceses (Canterbury, Rochester, Oxford and Lichfield) agreed to ask their churches to do this.

It was clear both from church and population surveys that, during lockdowns and church building closures, online attendance appeared to be a lot higher than previous church attendance in the buildings. See, for example, 'Everybody Welcome Online' and 'Everybody Welcome to the future' (CPAS website). We wondered what would happen when church life could 'return to normal'. Our two key questions were:

- 1. How would attendance in the building have been affected by the covid pandemic? Would numbers be reinforced by lockdown online joiners or depleted by lockdown losses?
- 2. Would churches continue online once buildings were fully open and what would be the remaining level of demand for Church at Home?

In the event, a late resurgence of a Covid sub variant meant that England was not free of Covid at Easter 2022. The ONS estimated that 6% of the population of England had Covid during the week running up to Easter Sunday, 17th April. This was bound to delay the full return to the buildings, both because some church goers would be isolating at home due to their own illness or that of a family member, and others would be sheltering from the risk of catching Covid.

It is a shame that there was still so much Covid around at Easter 2022, because it meant that churches' decisions about whether to offer CAH, and people's decisions about whether to attend, will in part have been to do with the pandemic situation. Compared with 2019, if your church provides online access to your services then if you are ill or away on the day, you can still access your church's Easter service either at the time or later wherever you happen to be and on whatever device you happen to have. We do not know of course whether people chose CAH because they were ill with Covid (or shielding, or had someone in their household with Covid), or they chose CAH because they preferred it to in-person attendance.

In addition, the first Easter for three years free of Government imposed restrictions is likely to have tempted more people than usual to go away for a break. For example, at Bob's own church, attendance at the 'families' service on Easter Sunday was the lowest since onsite services resumed – just 40. Two weeks later, during the school term, attendance was more normal – 72.

We don't yet know what "normal" CAH looks like, because we haven't yet got to "normal" times. At Easter 2022 in some churches people were still wearing masks and socially distancing, in others they were hugging each other. Different churches were at different stages of the journey. Despite Covid disruption having not finished by Easter, it was still valid to ask by how much church attendance had recovered and how much was there still to go.

This report focusses wholly on the attendance numbers. The main purpose of this exercise was to compare Easter 2022 with the last 'normal' year of 2019 and to see what could be learned about how church attendance has changed over this period,

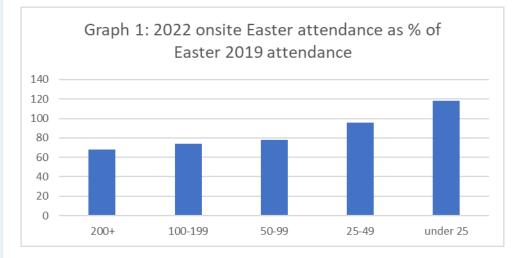
to help understand how the churches could grow and develop in the future. It is likely that numbers accessing services online will have fallen as churches reopened their doors and as general life picked up again after lockdowns. This was to be expected. A further question for Easter 2022, though, is whether CAH has still made a significant contribution to total attendance, and therefore to help plan for ongoing online church in the future

By early May 2022 around 50% of the churches across the four dioceses that had provided data for 2019 and reported as an individual church (i.e. not combined their data with any other churches in the parish) had also submitted their 2022 Easter figures. As a result, 755 churches are included in this analysis. The patterns and changes were similar in each diocese, suggesting the results give a reasonable impression of the national picture and provide a snapshot of 'late Covid' times. Our thanks are due to everyone who responded with their church's data.

Did numbers attending onsite recover to the 2019, pre Covid, level?

No. Total onsite Easter attendance was 75% of 2019 – a big increase on 2021 but still some way to go. We do not yet know how onsite attendance will develop over the rest of 2022 as Covid recedes further. Also, in 2022, going to the building was no longer the only way to go to church, so full comparisons need to also understand the impact of CAH.

Did some types of church recover their onsite attendance better than others?



Yes. The smaller the church the better the recovery onsite (Graph 1).

Churches with 200+ attendance in 2019 on average had only 69% of their 2019 attendance but the smallest churches with under 25 in 2019 averaged 118%.

This strong pattern was true for every diocese and size group. Maybe a small village community was easier to hold together through lockdowns than large, eclectic communities spread far and wide. Perhaps people were more willing to return to a church building they knew would be almost empty than one they feared might be crowded.

There have been fears for small churches emerging from Covid – will their elderly congregations have died, fragmented, be unable to re-convene? With their technological edge and younger profiles, perhaps larger churches will have had the strength to withstand the lockdown years better. The Easter 2022 onsite

attendance numbers, however, suggest the exact opposite. Small churches seem to have recovered their numbers back in church buildings better than large ones.

We do know, however, that a smaller proportion of small churches provided their Easter 2022 figures. It may be that some small churches that have suffered decline have not prioritised filling in their statistics for mission form for this exercise. Therefore, when the data for all the churches in the diocese are available, the apparent growth of the small churches might shrink.

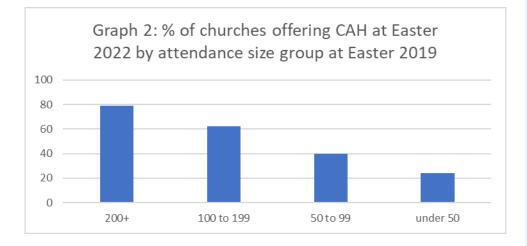
Has there been a changing pattern of CAH provision since 2020?

Yes. Church attendance changed considerably between 2019 and 2022 with the introduction of 'Church at Home' (CAH) arrangements enforced by the various lockdowns and restrictions of the Covid era. At its peak, it is estimated that around 80% of Church of England churches offered a 'Church at Home' option (Everybody Welcome to the Future' Bob Jackson & George Fisher p7, CPAS website).

Although some churches used printed materials, emails, and phones to maintain contact and provide worship for their congregations, most responded with online services. Most of these began using mobile phones and laptops from vicarages to provide services using Facebook. By Easter 2022, however, the dominant format was livestreaming of onsite services via YouTube. Only a few churches reported still using other CAH methods – overwhelmingly CAH meant online services and, mostly, online services using YouTube.

Were some types of churches more likely to offer CAH than others?

Yes. Larger churches were more likely to be offering CAH (80%) and they had a higher response rate to our request for data than small churches. The larger the church the more likely it was to offer CAH at Easter 2022 (Graph 2), so the proportion of our people still having a CAH option from their own local church was higher – about 59%.



Have some churches abandoned online as restrictions ended?

Yes. In 2020 up to 80% of churches had some sort of CAH offering. A survey in Lichfield diocese in April 2020 found 65% of churches offered online worship, with a further 16% offering other provision. By October 2021 around 57% of churches in the four dioceses included in this report reported having a CAH offering (2021 Statistics for Mission returns) and around 44% of churches

reported some CAH at Easter 2022. So, about 13% of all churches had stopped offering CAH between October 2021 and Easter 2022.

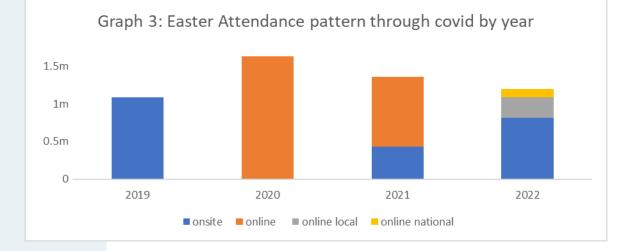
Does adding in CAH make 2022 attendance greater than 2019?

Yes. Adding CAH estimates suggests total attendance at Easter 2022 at the 755 churches who provided figures was around 16% higher than in 2019. Almost all CAH provision was online and most of that was YouTube.

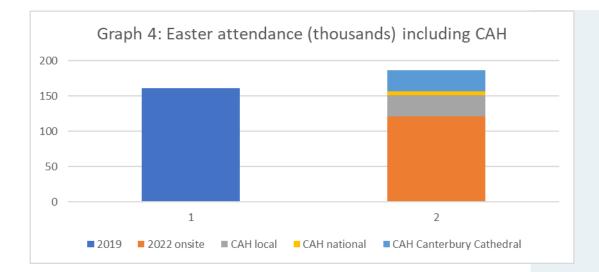
CAH attendance cannot easily be counted, only estimated. However, it is important to make estimates to try to make sense of what is happening, even though some of the estimates may be little more than educated guesses. Much has been learned since the early days when people were amazed at the number of Facebook views before realising most of them lasted only a few seconds. For an explanation of our (conservative) method used to convert YouTube and Facebook views to attendance estimates see the Appendix.

At Easter 2020, when all our churches were closed, online attendance was estimated to be at least around 50% higher than onsite previously ('Everybody Welcome to the Future' Bob Jackson & George Fisher, CPAS website). 2021 saw churches open with fewer people attending onsite and a continued online presence. Graph 3 broadly estimates attendance levels and composition between 2019 and 2022. Online attendance in 2022 is shown separately by local online where people are mainly accessing the service at their local church, and national online where people are accessing a service at a church with a national online profile. Examples of the latter include Canterbury Cathedral, Holy Trinity Brompton, All Saints Margaret Street, All Souls Langham Place, Gas Street Birmingham, Kings Chapel Cambridge and the C of E National Service. All these services can be viewed on YouTube with view numbers easy to read.

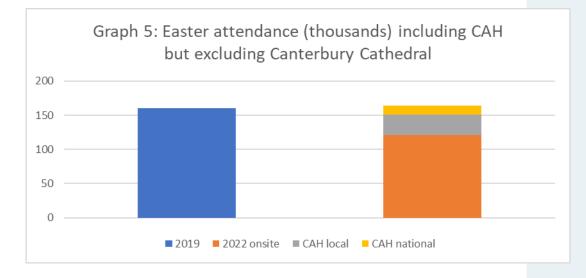
Graph 3 gives an indication of the changes in attendance patterns seen over the last four Easters.



However, this growth is mainly due to Canterbury Cathedral's extraordinary YouTube view numbers - 47,000 views representing at least 30,000 people, maybe more (Graph 4). Online attendance at the Cathedral's 2022 Easter Eve and Sunday services was greater than the entire 2019 Easter attendance in the whole diocese. Attendees would appear to be spread all over England and the Anglican Communion, with some even flying across the Atlantic to attend in person the Cathedral that had become their own online.



Omitting Canterbury Cathedral to give a better estimate of the parish church picture suggests estimated total attendance only slightly higher than in 2019 (Graph 5). Canterbury Cathedral is left out of all the online statistics quoted in this report.



Onsite attendance at Easter 2022 was 75% of Easter 2019, local CAH added a further 19%, making 94% compared with 2019, and an estimated 8% more people in each diocese were accessing a range of online services with a huge national reach, making 102%. Whether there is more double counting in online numbers than onsite we have no means of estimating but some allowance for that possibility has been made by including only a proportion of recorded views in the online attendance estimate (as described in the Appendix).

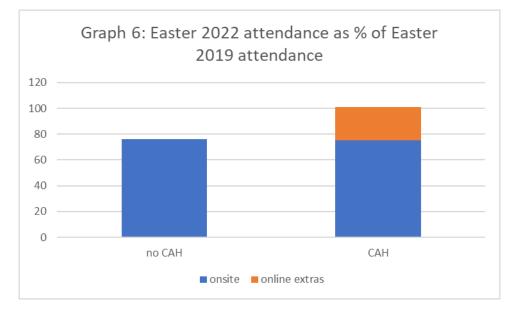
If the downward trend in Easter attendance from 2014 to 2019 in the four dioceses had continued in a Covid-free world to 2022 we would have expected the 2022 Easter attendance onsite to be about 94% of 2019. So total attendance at Easter 2022, including online, is markedly higher than where it might have been without the pandemic and its resultant introduction of CAH.

Did churches focussed only on the building recover more of their onsite attendance?

No. Some churches have stopped CAH and anecdotally we have heard that in some instances this is to encourage people back into the building. But onsite-only churches averaged 76% of 2019 attendance at Easter 2022, while churches

with CAH averaged 75% onsite and 101% in total (Graph 6). The nearly identical onsite recovery is despite the average church with no CAH being smaller. This shows that offering CAH did not detract from onsite attendance but was additional to it. When the national and regional huge online services are added in, the contrast is even greater. Churches should not expect that stopping their CAH will lead to a balancing increase in onsite attendance.

Just as online shopping, working, socialising and entertainment are retaining a significant permanent proportion of their lockdown gains, so it seems is online church. Churches that do this well are likely to be better placed for future growth.



This is no surprise. Many of the longer-term online attenders might either be too frail or ill to attend onsite or be unavailable on the Sunday morning and are catching up later, or live too far away, or naturally relate online, or who are new to church and finding their way online first and may attend onsite in the future, are away that week, or find that online fits naturally into their culture and lifestyle. Those few churches offering online worship before lockdown found that, far from taking worshippers away, new people attended online for a while before plucking up the courage to attend the building. Being available online can be a new way for churches to do evangelism and church growth.

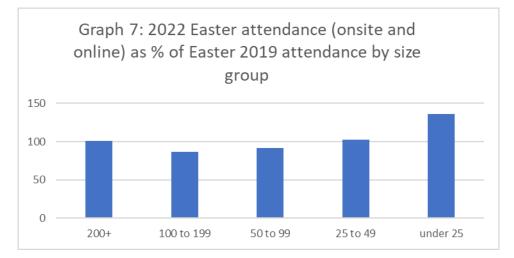
Every church should consider whether they should offer online in the light of the range of good practices that have been emerging, while recognising that resources are limited so to do online may mean the church needs to reprioritise something else.

Does adding in CAH make a difference according to size of church?

Yes. Graph 7 shows churches in five groups according to their attendance level at Easter 2019 by attendance at Easter 2022 including an estimate for CAH:

This graph shows that the difference in change in Easter attendance between 2019 and 2022 by church size partially disappears when an estimate for CAH attendance is included.

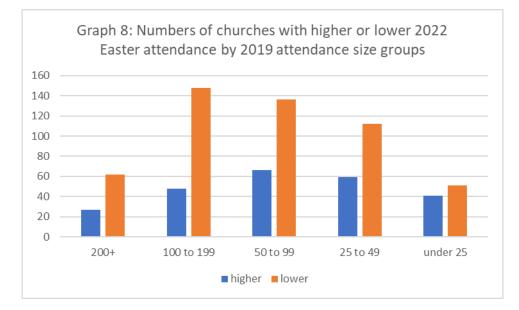
We saw in Graph 2 that the larger churches were more likely to offer CAH, and this partly made up for their lower attendance onsite (Graph 1). The large



churches offering online services raised their total attendance to the 2019 level, leaving the 100-199 size group as the one with the weakest overall recovery. It seems the large to medium churches might benefit most from diocesan help to rekindle relationship with those who they have lost contact with during the Covid pandemic.

Have most churches had a similar experience?

No. There are patterns. Those offering CAH are reaching more people than those without it, and small churches have recovered faster than large ones. However, there is huge variability. We would expect greater volatility in Easter attendance numbers than in, say, Usual Sunday Attendance, because it is just one day in the year. But the Easter 2019 to 2022 comparison shows up far greater variability than normal. Many churches had fewer than half their Easter 2019 attendance and some had more than double. In two thirds of churches total estimated attendance was lower than in 2019 and in one third it was higher (Graph 8). Only in the smallest size group (attendance of under 25 at Easter 2019) did the number of churches with higher attendance at Easter 2022 come close to the number with lower attendance.



Many churches, especially larger ones, seemed to have much smaller congregations at Easter 2022 than in 2019. However, other churches had huge increases, including one or two large churches with major online attendance, a cluster of churches with very low attendance in 2019 (under 25) that had much higher numbers in 2022; and a scattering of churches of all sizes that appear to have far bigger numbers in 2022. Some of these may be for local reasons ('We had a joint service at our church one of the years') but most seem to compare like with like and reflect an underlying reality.

Churches with the biggest changes could be asked for further interpretation of their figures so that these striking changes can be better understood.

These are attendance numbers on one day only, but it does look like churches' experiences have differed through the months of lockdowns, Covid restrictions and the rise on online church. We do not yet know how many churches with lower attendances at Easter 2022 are simply being late to recover their onsite attendance due, say, to a large scale local Covid outbreak at Easter, or many of their congregation being away for Easter, or whether they have lost people from their congregation permanently, but for many churches this is a time to truly understand who was in their congregation in 2019 and where they are now.

This also implies that this has been a time when individuals have re-considered the role of their church in their lives and families. Some will have switched churches locally and others will have changed to engage with services online. It does appear there are many former churchgoers who had not returned onsite by Easter Sunday who could be balanced by a similar number of new churchgoers elsewhere, some online. Whether the churches end up larger or smaller after Covid probably depends on how well they can encourage back the leavers and integrate those joining online.

That online attendance continues to be so significant, even when the buildings are fully opened, suggests that it will continue to play a significant role in the future churchgoing mix.

As part of its vision, the Church of England has a national priority **'To be a church** where mixed ecology is the norm' this would be a permanent mix of onsite and online. Onsite and online should feed off each other in a new era of fresh and traditional church growth for the 21st Century. (See 'A vision and strategy for the Church of England in the 2020s') The evidence from Easter is that this ambition is realistic.

Can we now monitor post-Covid progress in real time through 'Statistics for Mission'?

Yes. The encouraging 50% response rate to four diocesan requests for immediate data suggests that, for example, it should be possible to collect October attendance figures on a similar basis in any diocese and analyse them straight away. Figures in October 2022 should give a firmer indication of the longer-term post-Covid situation.

Discussion of change

Our figures show that in the four diocese onsite attendance levels at Easter 2022 were 75% of those at Easter 2019. There is still hope that more people will return to onsite congregations once the threat of Covid dwindles.

One area for attention is the needs and experience of the largest churches on whether and how they can grow back their onsite attendance again. Larger churches are more likely to be in urban settings and perhaps congregations in large town churches felt less belonging and commitment to their church than community congregations in villages. Perhaps, also, people were more wary of returning to crowded buildings than ones guaranteed to be almost empty. The larger churches also tend to have a higher proportion of families in their congregations. In some dioceses there is a sense that churches tended to find that families were harder to keep in touch with over Covid and perhaps harder to bring back onsite.

The sample is not entirely random as there was a higher response rate from the larger churches. As they seem to be the churches with the lowest onsite recovery

(10)

rates then in due course the full population of churches may show a slightly higher recovery rate than this sample. On the other hand, there is also likely to be a bias in the opposite direction in that the sample may be skewed towards churches who were pleased with their Easter attendance and so more likely to be report. There is no way to adjust for this (other than visiting some of the non-responders and looking through their service registers). We will be able to measure the impact of these biases when we have the full dataset in 2023.

The fact that it proved possible to get a 50% response in such a short period of time suggests that it would be possible to invite churches to fill in other data at the time. For example, churches could be asked to fill in their October Count data at the start of November, and this could be analysed, and the results circulated by Christmas rather than waiting nearly a further year to find out the figures. This would give a much firmer indication of the size of the post-pandemic church than this initial Easter snapshot.

Six priorities for churches

- 1. Churches will navigate the new post-Covid world better by working out who they have gained and lost, and why. How has the world changed where they are?
- 2. For some churches the priority will be to encourage back those who have not yet returned. This may be due to lingering Covid fears, or the breaking of habit, or a feeling of isolation from the church community. In the case of family congregations that have been a long time in abeyance, children may have grown up and moved on. It looks like a time for the old-fashioned pastoral basics of a team making lists and visiting.
- 3. For other churches the priority will be to welcome, nurture and integrate new people who have arrived, perhaps via online contact. The 'Everybody Welcome' course found on the Church House Publishing website might be helpful.
- 4. Many churches will want to develop and improve their online presence and services. For help in developing good practice online see the Church of England Website 'Resources' then 'Guide to online and onsite services'. Identifiable good and bad practices have emerged. A properly hybrid service seems more effective than simple one-camera livestreaming without personal contact. In some churches specialist shorter-format online services are proving quite popular. The online daily office continues to have considerable take-up.
- 5. Churches have gained expertise in social media, streaming technology and onscreen communication. Many will wish to deploy and develop this hard-won expertise for evangelism and worship in the future. Some will want to develop their social media presence to advertise their programmes and services, for example, using Facebook invitations to YouTube services.
- 6. Churches with a significant online presence will need to decide the nature of their online offering. Who is it for and how ambitious should they be? Are they producing a television programme for strangers or are they embracing their online participants into the community of the church?

Three priorities for dioceses

- 1. In the light of the finding that it is the larger and medium churches that are having the most trouble recovering their onsite attendance, dioceses will want to prioritise their support on those churches.
- 2. In the light of the continuing importance of online, offering technical support to help churches offer good quality CAH will be a continuing priority.
- 3. In the light of Covid impacts still unravelling, dioceses may wish to monitor their 2022 October attendance early to get a fuller snapshot of the post-Covid church.

Appendix – Methodology

DATA COLLECTION

Easter figures plus electoral roll numbers can be entered into the online parish return system from a few days after Easter (Sunday, 17 April 2022) when part of the 'Statistics for Mission' form opens. These figures are stored securely so there is no need to re-enter the figures when the full return should be completed in January of the following year. So, over the course of a year, there is little or no extra work required of churches to do this. Churches were actively invited to fill in their 'Statistics for Mission' 2022 Easter communicant and attendance numbers by the end of April 2022.

As many parish churches continue to reach worshippers with variations of CAH, those in participating dioceses were asked a new supplementary question – did you offer a 'church at home' option on Easter Sunday and could you give an indication of how many people accessed it? This is the same question asked in the 2021 Statistics for Mission enquiry about October 2021 attendance, so comparisons can be made. We are very grateful to Dr Ken Eames of the national R&S team who worked with us to design and implement the new question.

ESTIMATING ONLINE ATTENDANCE FROM CHURCH REPORTS AND VIEW FIGURES

It is important to make estimates to try to make sense of what is happening to our congregations both onsite and online, even though some of the estimates of those joining services online may be little more than educated guesses. Much has been learnt since early 2020 when people were amazed at the number of Facebook views before realising most of them lasted only a few seconds. The method used here for estimating Easter CAH attendance is:

- Where a church gives its own estimate of people, simply use that. In just a few cases the estimate was checked and revised if it looked out of line with views data given by the church.
- 2. Where a church gives views data usually for YouTube views – all 'as live' views were included plus 25% of subsequent views over the following week. If a church simply gave the current running total without a division, then 50-60% of the views were accepted as participation, depending on the length of time elapsed since Easter Sunday. By 'participation' is meant viewing at least half the service length. Each device is assumed to be accessed by an average of 1.5 people.
- 3. Where a church simply said that they streamed the

service on YouTube then we looked for the Easter service on the YouTube channel, noted the current views and applied the method at 2 above.

- 4. Where a church gave Facebook views the same procedure was used except that only 5-10% of 'after the live-time' views were included as Facebook is a much shorter-form platform.
- 5. Where a church indicated numbers of people reached through printed or emailed service orders, 25% were assumed to take part at a rate of 1 person per address.
- 6. Where a church indicated only that they offered CAH but without giving any information at all it is assumed that its CAH numbers were the same as the average for that size of church where an estimate had been possible.

This method has evolved from analysing several congregations and checking with some people handling the online element in their own church. It seems reasonable and conservative but we acknowledge it is just an estimate!

It is now possible to attend the same service twice – once onsite and later online. It is possible to attend your own church onsite on Easter Sunday morning then another church online later. No specific allowance is made here for this 'two-timing'. Rather, a general allowance is made for both double-counting and casual views by discarding 75% of YouTube postservice viewings.