

Being a Church Community in a Digital Age

Samuel Wells

'I thought I'd died and gone to heaven.' It's a phrase I used to hear a lot when I lived in North Carolina, when a person was telling me about a place where they felt happy like never before. But let's imagine for a moment now that you had died and gone to heaven. What would it really be like?

I suggest heaven is the end of painful separation. The hardest things in life are about painful separation. There's someone you love, but you can't be with them, maybe because of a global pandemic. There's someone you've had a fight with, and you can't be reconciled. There's a social group from whom you're alienated, and there's no gesture you can make to rectify the situation. Most of all there's the essence of all things, God, from whom you've been separated in a thousand ways, but with whom you're now united.

But there's something else about heaven, that runs somehow counter to the end of painful separation. That's because there's such a thing as healthy separation. We want to be close to one another, to hug, to play, to talk and interact, perhaps to be very intimate; but not to lose our identity, to be the same as each other, with no separate being. Even when we love someone passionately, their difference is at least as thrilling as their sameness. And if we think of God, we're not sure we want simply to be absorbed into the divine essence. We'd actually like to keep our own identity, a healthy separateness, thank you – even if we lose all the negative associations of that separateness.

So this balance, between the togetherness that's like being utterly united, and the separateness that ensures this is relationship and not absorption, names the perfection of being we strive for on earth and long for in heaven. We have a word for the togetherness – it's called union. We have a word for the relationship – it's called with. The Latin for with is com. Put the two words together and you have communion.

Communion is the centre of the Christian faith, because we believe it names the experience we can glimpse on earth that we can know fully in heaven. Being with but also being together. It also names the way in Christ the divine and the human come together: Jesus is one person, which is together, but has two natures, divine and human, which are with. Communion is also the word we give to the ceremony in which we tell our truthful story and infuse it with the story of God, with and union again, and the bread and wine are both ordinary foodstuffs and carriers of Jesus, who when we consume the elements is both in us and with us.

But being human isn't just about feelings and experiences, the soft stuff, it's also about the hard stuff of planning and preparing, paying for and making, organising and running, working and restoring. This is communion turned into practical action. We have a lightly different word for this – a word so similar to communion that it's almost the same, but still different enough that it's a separate word. That word is community.

Communion and community name the two aspirations of church. The one is about being in, and bringing others into, relationship with God; the other is about relating civilly, cordially and sacrificially with one another, and attending to the things that need doing to function humanly. When Jesus talks of the kingdom of God, he's talking about this communion and community becoming a reality for all people.

Something significant happened during covid in relation to these things. For a period from March 2020, we ceased to be able to experience communion and practise community in ways we'd assumed we always would. We discovered kinds of online interactions most of us had never known before and, in many cases, we started personally or professionally connecting with groups of people online in a way and to an extent we'd never done before. For the early months of the pandemic, we saw this as a provisional measure to tide us over until we got back to new ways of relating. But gradually we started to realise that online ways of connecting weren't just an interim make-do – they were here to stay.

And that meant we had to think seriously about what online communion means, and what online community really is. Let's start with communion. Faith and discipleship didn't necessarily suffer or significantly change in covid's circumscribed circumstances. We could still pray, grow in holiness, read scripture, seek God's kingdom. What changed was church. In baptism we are made part of the body of Christ; we are no longer atomised individuals. When we gather for the Eucharist that body is restored in its divine sense when we make our confession and receive absolution and is renewed in its human sense when we share the peace with one another – especially with anyone from whom we've been estranged. In receiving communion, the body of Christ that is the church meets the body of Christ that is Jesus.

This isn't just a present-tense thing. When we celebrate communion, we recall Jesus gathering at the Last Supper. We recall how he incorporated the Passover tradition and himself became the lamb of God whose

sacrifice delivered the Hebrews from slavery. We recall Jesus' words, 'Do this and remember me.' We are making the past present now. Like a ring that reminds the wearer of a commitment made in the past, celebrating communion is a renewal of our conviction that in Jesus, God has given us everything we need.

And the future tense is no less significant. We believe that, beyond death, we shall be raised to everlasting life; and that such life resembles a banquet, at which, as in the parable, we eat with the whole panoply of those God has sent Jesus to invite. Our engagement with the outcast, the enemy and the stranger today is rooted in our awareness that these are the people besides whom we shall be sitting in glory. The Eucharist is an anticipation of the way we shall be spending eternity.

Now here's the important part. All the connections we may take for granted in a Eucharist – the forgiveness that makes us one with God, the reconciliation that makes us one with one another, the communion that gives us both with and together – and all the connections in the past with Passover and the Last Supper and in the future with the banquet of the dispossessed – they all depend on the action of the Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit the bread and wine are just a wafer and a sip, reconciliation is just words, the Last Supper is just a story. When we say for us it's a whole lot more than that, and that in an act of worship perhaps we felt we'd died and gone to heaven, we're saying we felt the action of the Holy Spirit deeply and tangibly. So what happens in online communion is that the past and future dimensions are largely unchanged, but that in the present tense we're needing the Holy Spirit to do more work than it usually does.

By that I mean we need the Holy Spirit to make us mindful of the diverse members of Christ's body, rather than having many of them sitting all around us. We need the Holy Spirit to help us be reconciled with those from whom we're estranged, when we can't just go and shake their hand. We need the Holy Spirit to bring us face to face with who we are and who God is, when we can't just eat the bread and drink the wine. It's a bigger ask of the Holy Spirit. But let me tell you a secret: I think the Holy Spirit's up to it. And sometimes the more you're given the more grateful you are; and the more stretched you are the fitter you become.

Let's turn to online community. Here the issues are different. We're still talking about the practical outworking of being separate and together. But here's it's more obvious that there are some features of online community that genuinely enhance regular community. By this I mean social networking platforms enable a regularity and breadth of conversation and interaction person no one person could keep up – it carries on when you're busy and you join in when you're free. And teleconferencing makes possible a depth of international relationship we've never known before, instantaneously connecting us to people and fostering conversation across previously daunting distances and divides.

Of course this technology works better for some people and can leave others feeling left out. Meanwhile there are things essential to community that can't happen online. But I humbly suggest we consciously change our mode of talking about online community, from lament about the valuable things it can't give us, to gratitude about the remarkable things it can. It's not 'I guess I have to worship through the same technology I use all day for work.' It's 'When I worship through this technology it blesses this technology for all the other times I use it.' The pandemic offered an opportunity not to cling on to as much of conventional life as we could for as long as we could, hoping it would still be intact enough to be resumed when covid ended – but instead to grasp a unique opportunity to explore online community to its fullest extent, in a conscious experiment in something of which we might otherwise never have recognised extraordinary potential.

The way to engage in community is not to say 'In-person is deep and tangible and real, and online is superficial and trivial and disembodied'; it's to say, 'How can we learn to take part in online community in ways that expand, enrich and extend the capacity and quality of community as a whole?' And, at the same time, we altered our notion of charity from 'Can I get you a sandwich?' to 'Can I help you access online community?'

The secret of happiness is learning to love the things our heavenly Father gives us in plenty and not setting our hearts on the things that are in short supply. The situation of being suffused with the things God gives in plenty, and wanting nothing else, is called heaven. Many in the pandemic were full of complaint about death, disease, disruption and distress. But covid offered a moment to re-examine the heart of our faith: communion and community. What we were being offered was a deeper understanding of how the Holy Spirit creates connections that constitute communion; and a greater appreciation for the abundant ways to be community.

Thus by the end of the pandemic we hadn't died and gone to heaven: but we were be much better prepared for the communion and community we'll discover when we do. I want to give some examples of what that meant at St Martin's.

I'll start with music. St Martin's was one of very few institutions that continued to employ its professional singers throughout the pandemic. It did so by doing three things: making contracts with the Church of England to provide copyright-approved choral music to the whole church when live music wasn't permitted; producing music for our existing programmes such as our weekly Great Sacred Music, matching it with recorded spoken word, and requesting donations from viewers; and performing recorded concerts for which

viewers would pay commercially. I still get people all over the country thanking me for the gift of this music, which still continues through the Church of England weekly livestreamed service.

Then moving to community, St Martin's developed a Facebook page and closed congregation page overnight in March 2020, and developed a host of community activities, from breadmaking to online sung compline from people's homes, much of which continues four years later. It was a great way to keep tabs on people and reduce isolation. While some aspects of digital life were largely broadcasting, with no direct participation from those watching, the Facebook community was truly interactive. After-worship coffee online became a vital lifeline in lockdown and has remained a boon to those for whom worship from home has become the norm.

Somewhere in between broadcasting and truly interactive were a host of seminars and events. We created sermon workshop, in which we discussed the readings for the following Sunday, which gained a huge following, and still takes place, with viewers using the chat function to make suggestions and pose questions. We developed through HeartEdge a plethora of events, notably the monthly conversations with public figures, now published in the book *Living God's Future Now*. There were regular seminars on disability, climate change, sexuality, race, art, and other topical and informative issues. There was also a Community of Practitioners where around 35 pastors met weekly to discuss strategies and responses to the pandemic.

Morning Prayer remains an abiding feature of our congregational life. The number of live attendees has settled around 100, and this is a dynamic community where prayer requests and health updates mix with commentary on current events and pastoral care for absent regulars. Other forms of prayer arose and evolved. Notably the Saturday morning prayer walks, with a clergy member pausing in one of London's parks or along a river and reflecting on the glory of God and the interconnections of our lives, gained a following of thousands, and continues with hundreds participating. The Nazareth Community was already 80-strong with its commitments to silence, study, sacrament, service, sharing, sabbath, and staying with, and has now grown to include 150 Companions of Nazareth, whose participation is almost entirely online.

Perhaps the most significant development in covid for St Martin's was the evolution of the course known as Being With. From March 2020 we began running our ten-session enquirers' course online and participants seemed to find the safety and familiarity of their own home gave them confidence to share profoundly in ways that enhanced and enriched the course experience for all involved. Lockdown gave people time to reflect and examine more deeply than before. We now run courses both in the room and on zoom and around 600 people either have or plan to run such courses around the world.

You'll notice in noting all these developments I haven't yet mentioned livestreamed Sunday worship. That's not to say Sunday worship isn't the centre of a church's life; just to say it's the most problematic for transfer to digital life. Worship is not inherently a passive experience, and simply watching from home is a diminished form of worship, however inspiring the words and music are. But digital worship can become dynamically interactive, provided all concerned set aside their assumptions about the solemnity of in-the-building worship. In other words, people love to comment, send hearts at the peace, contribute prayer requests, rate the sermon, highlight features of the liturgy, and while some monitoring for inappropriate remarks is in order, people need to be given the chance to express their feelings and devotions without too much inhibition.

So these are the paradoxes of the digital age. The pandemic was ghastly but without it we wouldn't have been propelled into the quality of online community we now have. Community can take many forms but simply watching is missing the dynamism digital community can reach, so the most successful forms of digital community are not broadcast but interactive. This interaction can be global and not just local. Communion is more complex but an expanded understanding of the Holy Spirit can encompass even sacramental communion in extreme circumstances. In summary, as regards the development of online community during covid, we can say of the pandemic, echoing Joseph's words to his brothers in Genesis 50, 'You meant it for evil, God meant it for good.'

TRANSCRIPT OF THE Q&A WITH SAM WELLS

Luigi Gioia

I would like to start focusing on the issue of worship on Sunday. We have seen a decrease in number of active participants at Sunday worship. Don't you think that there is a challenge now, in terms of evangelization, in terms of teaching for the church, which is helping people to realize that while everything which has happened in terms of online development is good, the embodied experience, the physical presence gives us something which cannot be gained otherwise?

Sam Wells

Well, I think there's a single word that sums that up, which is Incarnation. Incarnation refers to the fact that God's purpose from before the foundation of the world was to be with us in Christ. And that means physically and that are being with God one another and the renewed creation eternally will also be physically.

So there is a status to physical togetherness that the telephone or Zoom or Facebook or live streaming can't identically replicate.

The astonishing thing about our faith is that the Holy Spirit can make the, you know, the embodied Christ present to us in significant ways, time honored churchy ways like scripture, preaching the sacraments, prayer and so on, but also in diverse surprising ways in the stranger in the generosity of the person who not long ago popped up.

What the Holy Spirit does is enable us to see the physicality of things that don't immediately seem sacred.

Obviously, during the pandemic, when those were restricted to the items in our living room, we'd probably spent most of the previous week trying to see the holy in the soft furnishings and the light switches and taking that about as far as it could go.

And that was the impoverishment, you know, whatever the desert fathers about sit in your cell and your cell will teach you everything.

They hadn't really banked on the pandemic, I don't think.

So I, I would I mean, the reason for explaining that in terms of the incarnation is to say, it's, it's the heart of our Christian faith rather than the sort of functionality of the Christian community.

In other words, I suppose I'm saying that physicality is about communion and not just about community.

I don't want to make too much of a hierarchy between communion and community, which is why I sort of set them very much parallel.

But clearly devotion, communion is, is the heart of our faith in this, in the sense in which I introduced at the beginning of my remarks, I will say, what you've described has not been our experience at ST Martin's.

That's to say the last year, I would have thought the church attendance figures have been the highest since I've been at ST Martin's in the 12 years.

And the reason for that I think is twofold.

First of all, a lot of people found us online and came to have a look, see if we were real.

We're just as on the telly.

So like those 150 Nazareth companions, I mean, they, they now see us as their sort of mother church in a kind of medieval monastic sense, their mother house and we probably have half a dozen of them pop up every Sunday from wherever they live and they're not all in the UK.

But also another thing that happened during the pandemic was a number of people who were unsettled at their own churches often because their own churches were a little bit more conservative on some of the issues of the day and started having a look and joining us for several months online and then started coming in the flesh, feeling quite familiar with the church because I don't know about this country, but certainly in the UK, they always say you have to be in a church seven times before you feel comfortable worshipping that sense of belonging, which is one of the reasons we lay on so many concerts and things because it gets people over the threshold.

But actually the online worship did that very successfully.

So the first time they came, they felt that wonderful combination of familiarity and novelty.

So we have, we have grown by sheep stealing, no question.

And I'm not ashamed to say it, although I'd be very cross if somebody else had grown by stealing ours as all clergy do.

So it's actually been a boom time period.

You want there to be something sufficiently dynamic about the in the building experience that nothing can replace it.

And I've worshiped with you here and I think there is and I've obviously worshiped many times to Martins and I think there is there and it's not just the coffee, you know, it really is and often it's the spontaneity in the midst of familiarity, you know, it is that opportunity to go and share the piece with the person you've had a email war with during the week.

It is the poignancy on, on Mother's Day of a child whose mothers died going to give her a flower to her, a grand grandmother figure in the community or something.

Is that those sort of spontaneity moments of profundity.

What happens if someone say is taken seriously ill during worship and how the whole community gathers around that person and recognizes their humanity in the midst of the holiness of what state, you know, it's those kind of moments.

You cannot get those online and, and they are unforgettable moments.

But I think reminding people of what is unique and special about being in the building is, is well worth doing from time to time.

I don't want to get into the hierarchy, you know, II, I, you know, it's a bit like choosing between Jesus and the Holy Spirit. You don't want to be in the game of saying one's better than the other. And I choose that example advisedly because there is the incarnate and then the more intangible in Jesus and the Holy Spirit. And I think that's the same about in the building and online, they're different and there are some times when online can be fantastic, particularly if you're away from the community for a while, people who travel for work and things and want to check in.

It can be absolutely fantastic. It's not worse. It's a wonderful gift. We mustn't see it as a threat.

I find that the offer both in person and online offers the possibility of a continuity in belonging to the church, especially in a city like New York.

So, the fact of being able to still being connected to the community and worship with us, even when life brings us for work or for rest elsewhere, I think is one of the major advantages and you can watch it later.

That's another thing about online, you can watch it later. So there is no excuse.

Luigi Gioia

Having lived in Midtown Manhattan for a year and a half I have the impression that it is a no man's land, it is very transitional, people come and go. What can the social outreach of our community be in this context?

Sam Wells

Well, I'd say there are three or four ingredients to that.

One is the **heritage** of what's happened in your community over a period of decades.

I mean, for us work with homeless people started in 1915 when the then Vicar Dick Shepherd opened the doors to soldiers going to the front from Charing Cross Station, which is just 300 yards away. These were ordinary working men and they didn't have anywhere to stay in London. And so we opened the doors to them and occasionally we turned a blind eye to who they brought with them, which was, would be quite actually open minded today, let alone in, in 1915. So that ministry has been going on for 100 and 10 years.

So something about the heritage, something about the **social context**.

You know, if you, if you are in a tiny rural community in the middle of nowhere, working with homeless people probably isn't your big issue. But if you're in Trafalgar Square, where, you know where the strand is, is probably the most dense population of homeless people in the most dense borough in the most densely populated city in the country. In other words, it's the epicenter of homelessness in the whole of the United Kingdom. Then you've got to be thinking seriously about doing some work with homeless people. That doesn't mean it's the only issue by any means.

But when you put the context and the heritage together, and then the third agreement ingredient would be your I, I suppose a **vocation**.

So to give an example from the last 12 years at ST Martin's, when I came to ST Martin's in 2012. We had a particular situation which was that the Westminster Council had been run by the Conservative Party for quite a number of years. And it had a policy of deterrence in relation to those from outside the European Union of which we were proudly apart at the time. That's by deterrence. Those with no recourse to public funds were given no resources by the council. Our homeless center that employs about 90 odd people, which is in the other half of the building in which I live had no staff who were paid to work with those from outside the EU and I discovered this for myself because about three weeks after starting the job, I went for a walk around the neighborhood with one of the overnight outreach workers who would wake people up and talk to people who he wanted to ensure we're connected with the services the connection could provide to help them get off the streets.

And, but I found we were walking past certain individuals and I said, what, why don't you, aren't you waking them up? And he said, well, they have no recourse to public funds. There's nothing we can help them with. So we, so I said, you're just gonna let them say, yeah, well, you know, there's nothing we can help them with and obviously I thought this was terrible. But also at the same time, we were finding that those same people were sleeping in ST Martin's church when we opened the church at eight o'clock in the morning, about somewhere between 12 and 20 of them would come, would walk in. I used to call them the ghosts. We wouldn't let them lie down but they would sit down and they'd get warm and they'd plug in their phones and they'd spend quite a long time there.

And then there was a third issue. That was a, that was a problem, which was the connection become so professionalized that only one member of our congregation was volunteering there. So we are here with this church famous throughout the country for homeless work, but actually only one member of our congregation was doing any homeless work. And that was just like helping make breakfast on a Saturday morning once a month. So it didn't amount to a great deal.

So we had these three things.

So Richard Carter, my colleague, you know, sat me down and said, I think we need to do something about this. And I said, I'd be delighted we could do something about this. OHave you got any ideas? So he said, let's start a group on a Sunday afternoon which Lucy here from ST Martin's now volunteers in. Let's provide an environment where they can be treated

with respect, can have a hot meal, can wash their clothes, can have a shower, meet each other, make relationships and make relationship with members of the congregation.

It took about a year to get off the ground. Now, there's about 70 of those people that come every Sunday afternoon, volunteering at Saint Martin's has been transformed because we have 40 or 50 people who once a month come in on a Sunday afternoon to make relationships and be of assistance in the Sunday International Group. And actually, it's led to a change in the policy of the connection because the connection stopped receiving the same kind of funding it did from Westminster Council, which is actually now a labor council and I don't think we were responsible for that. The whole situation has now changed.

It may or may not be good for the asylum seekers it's fantastic for the congregation because the congregation is being galvanized, you know, 40 or 50 people who had no outlet for their compassion and concern. Because, you know, you've all been in a situation, you're in this situation, walking here this morning, you walk past someone in a bundle of clothes on a sidewalk. You're full of concern but you have no idea frankly what to do. Well, these people are now doing something really helpful.

So it's transformed their self-esteem and their ability and also their engagement in issues of homelessness and migration through getting to know individuals and hearing their stories.

So, I suppose that it would be those three things: it's got to be authentic to your **tradition**. It's got to be appropriate to your **context**. But then there's also a vital element of **vocation** where you suddenly feel like in that conversation I had with Richard where you think hang on: I think we're I think we're being told something here. I think we're being shown something that these series of three problems all add up to one calling.

Q&A

Casey Underwood.

Thank you for being here, irrespective of physical presence. What impact has this time had in your congregation on membership? And on stewardship.

Sam Wells

Well, let me start with the second one. The Martin's vestry budget as you would call it is put together from three main sources, congregational giving. Obviously the commercial income from our business which employs about 120 people has a turnover of about \$7 million a year. And then additional funds provided by ST Martin's Trust. Those are brought, I mean, there are some small amounts of money that come from visitors and so on, but those are the three main constituents. The result of COVID was that the commercial income was more or less wiped out. So well, obviously, you have to make that up in some way from the other two sources. There were, there was some assistance during the pandemic from government style grants for certain things which the trust acquired on our behalf secured on our behalf. But we had to say to the congregation, how about it? And I mean, I suppose the phrase I like to use is that we discovered who our friends were because we basically wrote to all the people who'd come to concerts over the previous 10 years. A lot of people who'd given to the Christmas appeal for the homeless that I do on radio for every Christmas

anyone we could get our hands on. I think we wrote to about 33,000 people said, you may not have noticed there's a pandemic. How about it? This is your moment and it produced up towards a million pounds, probably 60% of which went to our homeless work and we kept a certain amount of it was nothing like enough. And it's really been phenomenal. The work our trust has done to keep ST Martin's functioning and to keep our business functioning because we considered closing our business. At the beginning of the pandemic, the congregational giving has increased. I often think having spent seven years in North Carolina that Saint Martin, the fields is more like an American church than any other church that I've known in the UK. And one of the ways in which like an American church is increasing, people's monthly giving is getting water out of a stone. But but if you say, oh, we're doing this big drive or the trust has, has got you know, 100 and £80,000 and it just needs to get to £200,000 to pass some crucial threshold for a match. But then actually people will cough up. So part of the exercise is to think of finish lines that were only 20 yards away that we could create for people to just cross over. And that, that's been reasonably successful. I mean, there's a you know, obviously giving, as we all understand, is a matter of discipleship and devotion, but there is a bit of calculation about it as well, don't tell anybody. If I'm really honest, I would like to think it would have been greater than that. Because maybe we didn't really tell people how much trouble we were really in for, for very good reasons. You can only send that message out once in your, in your incumbency as a, as a, as a rector. You have to choose the moment you're going to send it.

In terms of effect of membership, I think, I suppose I've, I've, I've mentioned that I do think our membership has actually grown. We, I mean, we, you know, English churches don't have membership in the same way that you do in a sense. Anyone who's resident, the parish is a member, they're entitled, whether they're a Christian or a church of England or not, they're entitled to get married in the church entitled to have their Children, baptized in the, in the church and so on. But obviously, we're in a particular kind of situation where it's not mostly residential and a lot of people look to us because they've heard us on the radio in some form or all these other ways we've talked about. So I think, I mean, the short answer is financially incredibly damaging, but in terms of the congregation's awareness of itself and identity and, and growth and depth.

The Nazareth community, which I referred to briefly is just an amazing intentional community, 100 people in the Nazareth community, 150 Nazareth companions online. It must be one of the fastest growing religious movements in the Anglican Communion right now. It's really had phenomenal growth. People are committing to spend three hours of silent prayer a week, which fascinating they do online. What silent prayer online means is still beyond me four years. But people find a certain solidarity in switching on that, you know. So it has been galvanizing and I can't be altogether sad about it as that.

Chris Lee.

I'm a priest in charge at Saint Mary. I love your point about embracing the gift and the good parts of this sort of new digital world and not getting caught up in the, the bad stuff. But I do wonder and this in my own ministry, even if there's more of a role for the church to be prophetic about the bad things and whether we can participate fully and fruitfully in social media and, and other things while acknowledging in a more critiquing way of, and I'm thinking in particular, perhaps of pretty horrifying sociological research about the effect of social media on teenagers and in this country, people are panicked about the depression

and suicide rate that's really gone up since the advent of social media. So as a wanting to be an apostle of these new ways of being community and being in communion, but also cautious and I guess prophetic is the word about the real dangers there.

Sam Wells

I think there's three ways to pursue justice in the world.

You try and do so through what you might call route one, **the rule of law**, independent judiciary, not that independent in this country sometimes. You know, separation of powers in parliament. You basically trust the legal criminal justice system and so on. Could maybe do some work on incarceration in this country. Maybe if you don't mind me saying so, and, and you know, but, but basically you trust the system.

Route two is **you**, you try to address and redress where the system goes wrong and protests and campaigns Black Lives Matter and so on. Me too. All of that.

But then thirdly, and I don't think we hear enough about the third option, but the third option is why I do the job that I do is we **try and create communities of character**, institutions in which everyone in this room is invested that try to say, well, it may not work everywhere but it can work here. And the reason I'm Vicars Martin in the fields is because we have this community of about 260 staff and all, you know, nice congregation and all these volunteers and all these people who follow us where, you know, I mean, I don't know how you quantify these things, but in my experience, more good is done by more people than any other community. I've been involved in my life. So that doesn't mean we don't get things wrong. Of course we do. But, but some of the wonderful things that happened there are really awesome.

I have the opportunity of being on BBC radio fairly often. I'd be more happy speaking in that environment and being prophetic, as you say, if I felt the church practice the virtues that I would be commending, but I don't think there's a single vice of social media that isn't practiced widely in the church as well as outside. I'm afraid to say the things that people say. I mean, you know, in the Anglican community, my wife, she's actually been promoted. She's now Deputy Secretary General of the Anglican community. I mean, what she experiences every time there's a primates meeting or something and the archbishop or whoever it is says something that some people don't like. People say ghastly things on social media about them, just hideous things.

They have permission on social media to say things they'd never say to your face. I'm glad they don't say I'm not asking them to say them to your face. So, you know, we're in a glass house and we can't throw stones is what I'm saying. However, you know, few months I've been starting to do some work on artificial intelligence because I think that is bigger than climate change. It's almost impossible to imagine for us how big that's going to become in a matter of five years or so. I'll have probably completed my research by the time our lives have been so changed that my research will be irrelevant. Anyhow, my basic argument as a, you know, Christian ethicist is as we are frightened of losing all these precious things about our society and our culture. The gift of artificial intelligence is, it forces us to articulate and unite around what those things actually are, which I think we've been pretty dreadful at doing. You know, I think, I think sociologically, we've become a fairly plural culture, which in

many things is great because, you know, being trans 30 years ago would be almost impossible. Now, it is possible. It's difficult in some places, but it's possible and, and many other social categories likewise. So that's plurality and that's great as far as I'm concerned.

But there's some losses in plurality, which means we hide behind tolerance and, and, and privatize our judgments. It doesn't mean we don't make judgments. It means we realize what we're not allowed to say publicly. Well, we need to make some of these public commitments as a church, let alone as a wider society. Otherwise, artificial intelligence is going to make them, make them for us. So that, that, that's how I kind of configure those things and, and what better place than a place like this or like your church to articulate the things that you most cherish.

So I see this conversation about social media about online community and social media is obviously related to that as, as having the right conversation in the right place amongst the right kind of people who've already made, you know, decade long commitments, including some people in this room to an institution which is trying to foster virtue.

Those are people who know what the sacrifices are, what you do. If you have a dreadful rector, not your situation right now. But you know, do you connive to get, get that person thrown out? Do you recognize their time will finally come to an end and outlive them? Do someone have the courage to go and say, I think the community is saying it's time for you to move on, you know, how do you handle that as a community? You've got decades of experience in the room with how you handle difficult things like that. Those are the things that we need to get very articulate about in a society, which is, you know, I will say, which is why things like January the sixth. Things like Boris Johnson proroguing parliament are really, really damaging because you know, going back to justice, no justice one is about cherishing the institutions and the rule of law that we have. So if even the leaders of our countries aren't able to do that. You know, that's just how much more civil society represented by this kind of conversation is important.

Luigi Gioia.

I've just come back from the EPN (the Episcopal Parish Network) I was there with the rector, Father Carl and with him, we were part of a conversation of rectors and deans of the Episcopal Church on inspiring leaders. And I was moderating a reflection and strikingly, one of the things that emerged is very similar to the point you've just made. In the Episcopal church, like in society, like many in other churches, there is a rhetoric of decline and people hear about declining all the time. Whereas most of the communities or a lot of the communities represented, they are thriving communities and the point that emerged is, and which I really loved is that communities are relatively independent from whatever decline happens at other echelons. As long as they are these communities of intent, community of character with a tradition which with a history of engagement of cooperating together, They are unique in the way they gather people and whatever happens at other levels, we don't need to listen to those doomsayers, but rather, we have to become aware of the treasure we have in our community, the treasure we have in the ability we have developed over decades to work together and to be together in a way which is almost unique in our society today. And I think that one of the purposes of the conversation we are having here today and the following ones I hope to carry on having is realize that the treasure we have and how much this treasure can be a factor of growth for us and of service for others.

Question

It would be interesting to know what Saint Martin's have done to draw the people in the congregation into a unity with the church, the ones who may come infrequently or never.

Sam Wells

Well, I guess 2 things, a macro thing and a micro thing.

So starting with a micro thing, we, we do, you know, online coffee is a real thing and has built real fellowship. Obviously, I don't attend it very often, but I certainly did during the pandemic quite a lot. But more substantially this, **the Being With Course** that I've talked about has had, I mean, it was, I guess providential it, we started working on it. October 2019, we launched the first group in the building in January 2020 it was perfectly suited to, to online adaptation. It really took almost no adaptation. In fact, some ways it works better online for various reasons.

If you're a stranger to a community, you know, if you came on one Sunday, you hadn't been to church for years or you maybe not, you know, didn't see yourself as having any significant history of going to church. For someone to say, would you like to come to this 10-session course that's starting on Thursday might be coming on a little bit heavy. But to say, would you like to join something online when all we've got about you is your email address and you can drop off any time and we don't know where you live or even what your phone number is, is pretty safe. And also the course really runs. It's a raw material isn't, you know, the finer details of Mark's gospel and why it's written in 16 chapters. And what happened to the last part of the 16th chapter is not that kind of head seminary knowledge if you like it is the conviction that the Holy Spirit has been working in your life since your life began. And therefore the raw material is the experience people have had in their lives. And the heart of the thing is about eliciting those experiences in ways that people come to understand is the Holy Spirit speaking through the other people in the group.

So people seem to be more comfortable sharing on that profound level in the comfort of their sitting rooms. With that constant sense that I could switch you, you lot off and you would never see me again. And I don't have to ever, do you see what I mean, the sort of safety of that is greater than, and as you know, I mean, it's the same here.

We started three or four minutes late today because what happens when you come into a physical space like this, you're looking for your coat and then someone needs to go to the loo and then you've seen someone you haven't seen for ages and then all, you know, and everything becomes, well, you don't have none of that online. You start right on time, you know, and you start getting texts from people who are two minutes late for a zoom, which you'd never do if you were in, you know, it's all those changes of culture. So, the Being With Course has been part of our growth at ST Martin's. It's brought significant numbers of people into our congregational life and into our wider life who are, who are not in London. It's been an untold blessing.

David Pengilly.

What are some of the elements of this \$7 million in business at Saint at Saint Martin's?

Sam Wells

The pandemic wiped out pretty much all of it. We have a large cafe, we have an outdoor cafe. We have 452 ticketed events a year. Most of them musical that's not including the worship services or anything. And we have an events business and we have a shop and actually the shop has been the slowest thing to recover since some people's shopping habits have really changed. So I would have thought the large cafe which is in the crypt, some of you would have been there accounts for about 50% of the turnover. But our new chief executive and the new food and beverage manager has done a fantastic job in increasing the average spend by about 80% within the cafe which has been great. But the overheads for the business have just shot up. You'll be aware that Mr Putin has played an unhelpful role, world affairs in the last couple of years and energy prices since the invasion of Ukraine have just gone crazy for us and a whole host of other changes as well. That's the cost of living crisis for the population more generally. So there have been a lot of challenges in the business.

Peter Devitt

Thank you for, for joining us and for your talk. I guess I'm a little bit of a cynic with regards to what I perceive is potentially an over rotation into privileging digital versus a in person worship, church experience. I think, you know, with some of the cultural phenomena that was, were mentioned, Gen Z millennial generation were constantly online. I think a key differentiator for the church is it's a place that's physical in community where you can disconnect and experience the metaphysical experience. God. My question for you would be like, what, what's your response to that? Do you think we're over indexing on it or is this gonna pay dividends for us in terms of outreach to people?

Sam Wells

I think of three constituencies of people, those who my least favorite American expression, I think from my seven years in North Carolina, people who are shut ins or house bound. As I think we'd more mellifluously usually say in the UK and can't get out. We've met a lot of those people and then, and we're not just talking about people, 85 years plus of age, you know, they, they may be agoraphobic. They may have all sorts of conditions that don't enable them to, to leave the home very often. So great success in reaching those people who we just didn't know were there until they found us. People who've had profoundly wounding and damaging experiences of congregational life, who are nervous about looking over the fence again and find joining online one way to do that. It's been immensely helpful for those people and then connecting with people who love our community and perhaps have been part of our community. But now are further afield. So those kinds of people, we simply weren't touching before this and now we are.

So that's got to be a good thing if I felt if, you know, if I was here with a story by which we, our congregation size on a Sunday morning service had gone down by 50%. and most of those people were saying they were watching online, but I didn't really believe them.

I give you a different answer. For us, it's been the opposite experience that as I, as I've said, people from other congregations who are unsettled, have found us people who, who wanted God but hadn't found God in the church have, you know, and often during the lockdown,

we're going round sort of an average of seven different worship services at different places in the course of a Sunday morning as research now tells us settled on us for a bit longer. They found something they wanted to stay for. So it's been a blessing to us.

I think we found this wonderful thing called online worship and we don't need to bother about in the building anymore. No, I mean, my answer about incarnation, I'm, I'm basically saying the fundamental form of relationship for Christians is embodied in the building interaction that that is, that isn't going to change any more than Jesus being the fountain and source of our faith is going to change.

But but my message this morning was I'm not disagreeing with anything about Jesus, but just think about the action of the Holy Spirit and how it can improvise in these different situations and how it clearly did improvise in the pandemic and, and just stay with that for a, for a little while because it doesn't have to take away from what we know it can supplement it.

Bill Greenlaw.

I'm a retired priest. The question I have is that in so many ways in our past, I think we would love to have visitors come to us and we would say, where's your home church? And my question is if we do what we're doing really, really well and that's of course, what we're trying to do, are we keeping people who need a physical, actual worshipping community to be a part of who can't get here regularly. I don't hear us saying you need to find that too. And I'm only wondering if a part of encouraging Christian faith in people in all of its dimensions is a part of being tangibly present in a congregation. And I wonder, do we need to kind of be aware of if we're really, really good at what we do online, we're going to get people from all over. But I don't hear us saying, maybe you'd like to worship in your own nearby place as well.

Sam Wells

Your point is a fair one.

But I would still want to put the onus back on those local churches.

I mean, when I went to Duke, I realized quite quickly, you know, I was in a foreign culture, obviously, some elements of that are about the difference between America and the UK. But some parts of that is the fact I'd always been a parish priest before. Now, one of the first lessons in the church of England, which is different from the episcopal church and different from a university setting. And the way in which it's different is this that if you're a parish priest, one of the first lessons you learn is **you don't have to know everyone, but everyone has to know you**. So I said, when I went to Duke community, about 36,000 people as you, as you probably all know, Duke is a basketball team and a hospital with a small liberal arts college just tucked on the side. But it likes to think of itself as a university that does a number of things of which those are two, those happen to be by far the best known, but it's a community of 36,000 people. And I said, we're going to treat this like a parish.

In other words, I mean, Duke Chapel, as many of you know, is quite a visible building by anyone's standards, but we needed everyone or every one of those 36,000 people. We needed to know us even if we didn't know them. And this was a crucial thing. **Every single one of them needed to experience us as a blessing.**

So if you keep those two principles, **everyone needs to know you and everybody needs to experience your church as a blessing.** I don't think you can go too far wrong in, in your ministry to your community.

So I wouldn't accept the criticism that we kind of Hoover up, we vacuum up people who should jolly well be going to the local church. We can plow the ground and furrow the ground for the ministry of those local churches. We can supplement, which is exactly what the companions Nazareth does. What with the best efforts in the world, those local churches can't provide in terms of the depth and the spirituality and the kind of spiritual practices and things that is difficult for local churches to provide. But it's up to those local churches to do those two things, make sure everybody knows them, knows they're there and experiences them as a blessing. And that's what every parish church is called to.

Matthew Moretz

People have been surrounded by this kind of iconostasis of screens and that have provoked a kind of alienation. I think like you have someone on the screen, maybe you could see them in a concert, maybe you could see them in a shape, you know, maybe you could meet them one time in your life if they came through your town. But now you have a figure, a priest, a clergy person or a musician, even a church musician, where you could literally, you could have experience with them on your screen, this alienated world that you have in your home. But then you can actually go and meet the person and you really could meet them. It's not a true para social relationship really. In the classic sense, it's something new. You can experience with someone on your screen, you can actually go and meet them any time you like. And I don't know, I don't even have a word for that. But I think what I'm discovering is that people are being invigorated by, it is a doorway to the incarnation relationship with, you know, the church leadership in new ways. Have you seen that manifest, you know, that that kind of move rather from in person to online but from alienated consumer of media to finding a part of the media landscape, that's actually a person.

Sam Wells

I think that's a good description of what I've been describing this morning.

It isn't the fear as a previous questioner articulated that somehow the quality of relationship would attenuate. So it became part of a screen and I don't know about you, but when I'm on a screen, I'm much more inclined to be doing something else at the same time, maybe two or three other things at the same time.

But the kind of quality of interaction of that focused attention where you're actually not doing anything else, you're not checking your phone, you're not even, you know, reading something you brought with you or the paper or whatever. You are actually wholly engaged in something together. I think that means we've got to up our game as far as in person worship is concerned because actually, if we really are going to be as one question of put it

just now, we really are going to ask for people's 100% attention for an hour and a quarter or however long your service lasts. We have to make that engaging for an hour and a quarter. That doesn't mean not trusting the silence, but it means so curating the silence. So it's a genuine silence and people are given good indications of how to use that silence and also instruction on good ways of using it.

We can't just say you should be in church and you should be, that's sort of treating people the way we might talk to. I think we have to realize the value of what people are giving us because they're so used to being on the subway, they've got their earphones in, they're also reading the New York Times. They've got the New Yorker in their bag that they might drag out at any moment and, and actually in worship, we're asking for something 100% attention, which is arguably something we don't even give the people we live with very often. So that's a big deal.

I don't think the experiences of online worship has been actually subtracting from that again, rather like the, when I was talking about social media and AI in response to the question a little while ago, I'd say that should make us focus on, does what we're offering, does what we're providing and making possible in the 75 minutes or so that we do have community together on a Sunday worthy of people's attention.

Luigi Gioia

Thank you very much.

I know that you have many more questions and if anything, this conversation with you has sparked more questions and a greater desire to reflect on these issues.

So I just want to say that this conversation with some is part of a series of talks and conferences we have been organizing since the beginning of the year.

The lectures on **Church, Social Justice and Civil Society** which are all available online if you want to see them again. There are two more to come, one on Dorothy Day and on Simon Weil.

They are supposed to be the preparation for the **symposium on Modalities of Engagement, Church and Civil Society**, which is going to take place the seventh and the eighth of May. We are planning things in such a way that the talks are going to take place in the evening after evensong from 630 to 8 o'clock on Tuesday and Wednesday. I know it's a big ask, but I really would love to recommend you to be there. And my hope is that on Wednesday, we have gathered really incredible speakers for this conference. My hope it is also that on Wednesday during the day, between 10 and four, those who can, can take part to workshops with our speakers because the aim of this conference is not purely to reflect on these issues. But it's also to give the opportunity to carry on the conversation we are having today: is this treasure we have of being a community of character, a community of intent with the tradition, with the history and with a huge desire to live out our vocation - a vocation and call is something that happens at a particular time. And there are many ways in which, at least as far as I can tell, having being here in the past year and a half and having enormously being stimulated by being here is that there is now a call. It is now a

moment in the life of our church in which we would love to find ways of being more involved. But we need to do some discernment about this.

So, finally, thank you to Sam. I'm personally really immensely grateful each time I interact with you, I feel immensely inspired. Father Carl is going to say a few final words.

Carl Turner

Thank you, Sam.

I can't remember it was some years ago, that the Diocese of New York and the Diocese of London have a twinning and it was set up just before the pandemic. A number of churches are included, are trying now to reinvigorate that relationship. I have worked in London, like you work in London. London and New York are very different cities. But we can learn a lot from one another. As we're in our bicentennial year, I think a lot of people asking the question is this, it, if I put it very bluntly, is this all we are?

What are we going to be the next 100 years?

Today's talks really made me think very hard. I'll give one example.

We did a self study in 2019. And it's clear that liturgy and music, you know, is something people to cherish at Saint Thomas, is that all we are and we don't have any businesses and like you, we do have endowment, but it's not enough. And currently we spend over, well, if we count the staff who support over 50% of our vote and budget on music. And I think the time has come where we have to ask the question, you know, we can't do everything and we should do what we do really as beautifully as possible. But what will that doing be in the next 100 years?

We've been spending some time since last May and the Vestry went away on retreat. I invited Pamela Lewis to contribute with some writings during Black History Month and people have been responding back and we're having some of these groups and meetings over the course of the next few months.

The idea is to do some more discernment about where we should be in the next 100 years.

We had a print of a Norman Rockwell of Saint Thomas. It's in the sixties because the statues are all different color to the rest of the zone because they're brand new. And there's Doctor Morris in his gown at the top of all this great flight of stairs and there's a verger precariously placed on a step ladder. He's putting those 19 fifties plastic letters into the notice port and he's just putting *Lift up thine eyes*. Meanwhile, with the traffic rushing, there's hundreds of people rushing by like this with their heads down and someone said recently they said, you know, you could, he could render that today. It's just that there'd be a few more mobile devices, you know, so nothing's changed in that respect.

How do we get people to lift up their eyes? I think that could be part of our engagement too.