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Using the Church of England digital media to win believers in the light of the proposals for experiencing Advent and Christmas Season (2022)

Wykorzystywanie mediów cyfrowych Church of England do pozyskiwania wiernych w świetle propozycji przeżywania Adwentu i Bożego Narodzenia (2022)

Abstract: The text describes the ways in which digital media can be used to win believers to the Church of England. Undertaking this media effort is all the more necessary as the Church's crisis deepens - with fewer and fewer worshippers engaging with their local Christian communities. The first part of this article describes the contemporary problems of the Church of England and attempts to address them through digital media. This description makes a convincing case for the prominent place social media has (should have) in the life of the clergy and laity of the Church of England. The Church is increasingly aware that through its online presence it can be present in people's everyday lives. The second part of the text shows suggestions for living the Advent and Christmas seasons using websites, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. The implementation of these proposals is intended to help people not only to find their nearest local Church of England community, but also to personally develop their spiritual life - to revitalise their relationship with God.

Keywords: Church of England, digital media, Advent, Christmas Season

Abstrakt: Tekst opisuje sposoby wykorzystywania mediów cyfrowych do pozyskiwania wiernych do Church of England. Podejmowanie tego medialnego trudu jest tym bardziej konieczne, im bardziej pogłębia się kryzys Kościoła – coraz mniej wiernych angażuje się w życie lokalnych wspólnot chrześcijańskich. W pierwszej części artykułu opisane zostały współczesne problemy Church of England i próby ich rozwiązania za pomocą mediów cyfrowych. Opis ten przekonuje o tym, jak znaczące miejsce w życiu duchownych i świeckich Kościoła Anglii zajmują (powinny zajmować) media społecznościowe. Kościół coraz bardziej zdaje sobie sprawę z tego, że przez swoją obecność w Internecie może być obecny w codziennym życiu ludzi. W drugiej części tekstu ukazane zostały propozycje przeżywania okresu Adwentu i Bożego Narodzenia przy wykorzystywaniu stron internetowych, Facebooka, Instagrama i Twittera. Realizacja tych pomysłów ma pomóc człowiekowi nie tylko w odnalezieniu najbliższej lokalnej wspólnoty Church of England, lecz także w osobistym rozwoju życia duchowego - ożywieniu relacji z Bogiem.

Słowa kluczowe: Church of England, media cyfrowe, Adwent, Boże Narodzenie

1. Difficulties of the Church of England and attempts to overcome them using the media

There is a perceived crisis in the Church of England that has been going on for several years. It has intensified during the COVID 19 pandemic (especially in 2020). In 2005, this community of Christians comprised 1,536,879 worshippers, and in 2020 there were 1,241,695; so this is about a 20% decrease. "The COVID-19 pandemic continued to have an impact on the worshipping life of the Church of England in 2021. Its effects were less severe in 2021 than in 2020. The Church of England's all age average weekly attendance, which includes Sunday and midweek attendance, was 854,000 people in 2019; 345,000 people in 2020; and 605,000 people in 2021"¹.

Concerning the life of the Church of England during the pandemic, research (published online on 1 July 2022 by Cambridge University Press) found that three elements influenced the weaker condition of this community of believers:

- a break from regular attendance at Sunday prayer assemblies (weaning oneself off going to church because of the experience that one can manage without this practice);

¹ K. Eames, *Statistics of Mission 2021*, <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2022-12/2021StatisticsForMission.pdf> [27.03.2023].

- not accepting the precautions in place in religious buildings related to the risk of COVID 19 (for example, the need to keep a social distance);
- the possibility of only using an online means of attending services has led to a cessation of engagement with the community².

Not insignificant to the perceived crisis is the increasing process of secularisation, which is affecting the declining attendance of the Church of England worshippers and their decreasing commitment to religious practice. There is a perceived fragmentation in local communities, which has been sustained in recent years by lively debates about sexuality, gender, abortion and ethnicity³.

The growing generational problem cannot be overlooked either; people under the age of 35 are both less likely to declare themselves as believers in God and to belong to the Church. They often describe themselves as 'spiritual, but not religious'. They will only choose to engage in religious life when they are convinced of the Church's honesty and benevolence, justice and transparency. "In my view the Church of England consistently fails all tests on this. Its failure to address sexism and homophobia, its systemic opacity, the lack of clear and accountable governance - well, you do the maths. Few will join. The emerging generation will get behind movements that address the political, ethical and global challenges that society faces. This excludes most churches"⁴.

A clear and timely description of the existing situation is a 2016 report by mirror.co.uk (by Victoria Murphy - Royal correspondent), which reads: "The number of people attending Church of England services each week has fallen to below one million for the first time ever, new statistics showed today. The figures reveal that the Anglican Church is experiencing its lowest ever levels of attendance - and now has fewer than half the numbers of regular churchgoers as in the 1960s"⁵.

² See: A. Village, L.J. Francis, *Giving Up on the Church of England in the Time of Pandemic: Individual Differences in Responses of Non-ministering Members to Online Worship and Offline Services*, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-anglican-studies/article/giving-up-on-the-church-of-england-in-the-time-of-pandemic-individual-differences-in-responses-of-nonministering-members-to-online-worship-and-offline-services/45FA-9F42662A16D098A74C46E4BC8321> [29.03.2023].

³ M. Percy, *With the Church of England dying, how much longer can we justify having bishops in the House of Lords? The Church of England could be extinct by the 2060s. That threatens to trigger a constitutional, as well as an existential, crisis*, <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/with-the-church-of-england-dying-how-much-longer-can-we-justify-having-bishops-in-the-house-of-lords> [19.03.2023].

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ V. Murphy, *Church of England's Crisis of Faith as Attendance Falls below 1 Million for the First Time*, <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/church-englands-crisis-faith-attendance-7167363> [30.03.2023]; see more: P. Maciaszek, *Digital Communication in Service of the Spiritual Life Development and Pastoral Activity of Local Communities of the Church of England*, „Media i Społeczeństwo” 9 (2018), p. 172-185.

The presentation of the background to the issue presented is worth enriching with two thoughts by Peter Lynas - the UK director of the Evangelical Alliance, he co-hosts Cross Section, a weekly podcast looking at the intersection of faith and current affairs:

- the first thought is the question of how people experience their everyday life (on the one hand, bombarded by an overabundance of information and influenced by the chaotic social media feed and, on the other hand, not knowing God's miraculous action towards man and not having a revitalised relationship with Christ);
- the second thought is the need to see the urgency of improving the use of the network in the process of the life and action of the Church, of winning the faithful to the proclamation of the Gospel (more and more human life is taking place online, but man still wants to experience everything not digitally but in personally)⁶.

The Church of England's ongoing crisis situation (both in terms of the number of believers and their involvement in the life of the local community), which had been going on for several years, was read as a challenge; through its presence in new media, the Church wanted to become more and more present in people's lives and society. The Church still wants to put as many people as possible on the path of faith leading to union with God. Achieving this goal was to be facilitated by a three-year programme (2016 -2019) on the use of digital media in ministry. The expectation was that all Anglicans - clergy and laity alike - should use social media (such as Facebook, Websites, Hashtags, Instagram) in the work of building the local community of the Church, thus contributing to its growth. Contemporary Christians should be 'the digital evangelists'⁷.

The Church of England's digital activity has been recognised and appreciated: The Church of England has been recognised with a gold award for best use of digital technology - Digital Impact Awards 2017: It was "awarded gold in four categories:

- Best Corporate App, for #LiveLent, developed jointly with Church House Publishing, Hymns Ancient & Modern, and Aimer Media;
- Best Corporate Website, for churchofengland.org, which was launched last November (News, 17 November 2017);
- Best Use of Existing Social Media Platforms: Small budget [less than £20,000];
- Best Use of Digital by a Charity, NGO, or NFP, for the 'Alexa Skill', which

⁶ See: P. Lynas, *The 4 biggest issues facing the Church in 2023*, <https://www.premierchristianity.com/opinion/the-4-biggest-issues-facing-the-church-in-2023/14656.article> [19.03.2023].

⁷ See: P. Maciaszek, *Media cyfrowe w procesie odnowy życia i działania Church of England. Wywiad z Rev. Ray Porter, MPhil - Director of World Mission Studies, Oak Hill College - London*, „Kultura i Historia” 33 (2018), p. 304.

provides answers to questions about faith and prayer and was developed with Church House Publishing and Aimer Media (News, 23 May)”⁸.

In addition, “to have won in three categories at the 2019 Digital Impact Awards:

- Gold for best use of digital by a charity for AChurchNearYou.com;
- Silver for best use of existing social media platforms for #FollowTheStar;
- Silver for best use of digital as part of an integrated campaign for #FollowTheStar”⁹.

It is worth mentioning that the Church of England website has a guide on how to get started using social media¹⁰. Creating a page or profile for your local Church is completely free and gives you the opportunity to reach out to those who are not yet part of a religious community. From this guide you can find out how to create an account for your church on each of the main social networks. You can also find tips and advice on how to manage your account securely.

The first question that arises when someone wants to engage in this type of activity is: which platform should they use? First, one should find out what the local community is already using, then consider starting activities on those very platforms for maximum impact. Introducing a completely new platform to the local community may be difficult and not have the desired effect. Main answer to the second question is how much time we have is not insignificant. If we don't have a lot of it, then you should start with one or at most two platforms. While it may be attractive to have multiple profiles to communicate with, if you don't have time to keep them up to date, they may not do a good job. Finally, the third question is what do you want to achieve - what are your goals. You need to find the right platform to reach out to families, support local charities and those who remain in their homes.

In demonstrating the use of the latest media technologies in attracting worshippers, it should not be overlooked that the Church of England website provides practical guidance on how to create and use a social media account by a religious community¹¹. In the first piece of information, they point out (once again in the Church of England message) that having and using such an account is free of charge and is a very effective way of reaching out to those not yet familiar with and connected to the local Anglican community. Key recommendations for using a community account include:

⁸ E. Thornton, *Church of England digital team scoops five industry prizes*, <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2018/19-october/news/uk/church-of-england-digital-team-scoops-five-industry-prizes> [31.03.2023].

⁹ *The Church of England. We're thrilled to have won*, <https://www.facebook.com/thechurchofengland/photos/a.10152647633406385/10157800319981385/?type=3> [31.03.2023].

¹⁰ *Guide to getting started on social media*, <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/digital-labs/blogs/guide-getting-started-social-media> [11.03.2023].

¹¹ *Creating a new social media account*, <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/digital-labs/blogs/creating-and-administrating-church-social-media-account> [11.03.2023].

- when setting up a social media account, it is better to use the publicly available church e-mail address rather than a personal address;
- choose your profile name and use it (invariably) on all your accounts - this practice makes you recognisable to your own community;
- it is important to remember that both the images and the words you put on your profile have a significant impact on the community you belong to and the impact you wish to create. It is therefore necessary to use images and language that make everyone in this community feel welcome;
- the next step after setting up your own account should be to share this message with your community and update it by using the appropriate link;
- posting information and experiences at least once a week will keep the profiles and pages up to date and interesting, and the community will be seen as open to all.

Giving the above tips, it concludes by listing the digital social media platforms (they are: Facebook page, Facebook groups, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp groups) and a practical description of each. As an example, a description of Facebook groups posted on the Church of England website can be presented here. It answers questions such as: Who can use these pages? For what purpose are they used? Can everyone comment on and share posts made on these pages? posts? How is content shared on Facebook? The recipient of these indications should come to believe that this digital platform can serve not only members of the Church community, but also the local community. This media message is intended to help people discover the Church and stay in touch with it. This message is created by posts in the news feed, live broadcasts, information about an event being organised and inviting people to attend, posting videos and images as reports of events. "Groups work best when there is a common interest or theme, such as a group for local families, Bible studies, or perhaps a hobby. Any member of the group can post and start conversations making it an ideal place to build a closer community online"¹². The creators of the church's message encouraging social media activity ensure that, with the tips provided, creating posts is done quickly and communicated to others easily.

At this point in the study, it is important to emphasise that the free online training courses (Digital Labs webinar) organised by the Church of England are of particular importance for gaining believers. Their aim is to impart skills in the use of digital communication, which should be used both in the process of one's own spiritual development and in passing on the faith to others. Indeed, the use of social media plays an important role in the work of

¹² *Creating and administrating a church social media account*, <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/digital-labs/blogs/creating-and-administrating-church-social-media-account#na> [11.04.2023].

evangelisation; through it, one can learn about the religious practices of the Church, find answer to emerging questions about faith and morals, and learn about ways of witnessing to the Christian life¹³. On the Church of England website, believers can also find topics and dates for future training courses (webinars); for example, in spring 2023 training will be provided in the following areas:

- AChurchNearYou.com: How to use the platform as your church's free website;
 - Facebook groups for your midweek communities;
 - How to use Canva for your church¹⁴;
 - How to use Facebook group page to serve your church and community.
- How to use Instagram for your church.

To achieve similar aims, a guide to hashtags for churches has been posted on the Church of England website¹⁵. Hashtags (#) are used to tag short messages on social networks such as: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram. This practice makes it easier to group messages and search for messages on the chosen website. In this context, it is also worth mentioning that, according to opinions posted on these church websites, hashtags make it quicker to find content even from senders who are not followed, and posts with hashtags are commented on much more often than those without.

Winning the Church of England believers is also to be achieved through Liz Morgan's publication, *Church Digital Champion*. She has compiled 31 unique tools and resources to help church communities fulfil the mission entrusted to them both online and offline¹⁶. Practice confirms that these communities make available the most commonly used tools in live streamed ministries. It is worth noting that most of these aids are free or do not cost much, and all are easy to use. The list created by Liz Morgan includes such resources and guidelines as:

- the use of royalty-free videos and music to help with reflection and prayer;
- graphics to make live broadcasts more interesting;
- photos to help with focus;
- the need to change the content posted on social media during the week;
- seeing the value and practice of praying together and reflecting on God's teachings in community;
- creating automatic captions of live social media meetings;

¹³ *Digital Labs webinars*, <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/digital-labs/digital-labs-webinars> [11.03.2023].

¹⁴ Canva is a free design tool which offers a number of great features to help you create logos, flyers, social media posts and much more.

¹⁵ See: *A guide to hashtag for churches in 2021*, <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/digital-labs/blogs/guide-hashtags-churches-2021> [11.03.2023].

¹⁶ See: L. Morgan, *31 amazing tools and resources to support your online - or offline - church services*, <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/digital-labs/blogs/31-amazing-tools-and-resources-support-your-online-or-offline-church> [11.03.2023].

- using a teleprompter for their script;
- streaming their content to multiple platforms at once;
- the need to stimulate activity from all family members.

The background outlined above justifies the efforts of those responsible for the life and work of the Church of England to recruit believers and help with their religious formation.

3. Suggestions for them time of Advent and Christmas period

Pandemic time, including at Christmas, has been very difficult for everyone. Therefore, the Anglican Church drew on its resources to develop a programme to help both those who attend church regularly and those who do not, in providing digital tools to invite those around them to pray in their local church to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ.

Amaris Cole - Head of Digital - presents the faithful of the Anglican Church with five ideas for inviting the local community (via digital media) to church in Advent and Christmas (published 25.11.2022 - beginning of Advent)¹⁷. It is worth noting that this idea is part of the Anglican Church's project called *#FollowTheStar: The Great Invitation*¹⁸. As you enter the project of five ideas for inviting people into the Church, as highlighted by Amaris Cole, please remember to tag shared material with @thechurchofengland.

The first of the five ideas involves sharing stories of Christmas memories related to your own local church community. You can recount your own warm memories of being in Church or the memories of someone close to you and thus help someone new or undecided to go to Church in December. You can film church members sharing their favourite memories of Christmas past. You could also take photos against a Christmas backdrop to create a range of different posts for social media. It's also worth finding out more about good questions to ask when creating reminiscence videos. When sharing you need to think about how to encourage as many people as possible to watch, you should ask your community (church) to share the material on the Church of England social media accounts.

A second idea is to record and share a short video, in which some upcoming community events should be discussed in detail. It is important that the video explains:

- what is about to happen;
- how long the event will last;
- whether it is also designed for children, i.e. for families with children;

¹⁷ A. Cole, *Five digital ideas for inviting your community to church this Advent and Christmas*, <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/digital-labs/blogs/five-digital-ideas-inviting-your-community-church-advent-and-christmas> [11.04.2023].

¹⁸ *Follow The Star: The Great Invitation*, <https://www.churchofengland.org/our-faith/what-we-believe/advent-and-christmas/follow-star-great-invitation> [19.03.2023].

- whether there will be any additional activities offered, such as refreshments.

Once the video is ready you can share it on Facebook, Twitter or try creating a reel (reels) on Instagram (you can download instructions and learn more about creating reels)¹⁹. If possible you can also add subtitles to make the video as accessible as possible. It is worth remembering that using video (rather than writing longer text) can also help those with reading difficulties and ensure that visitors to the portal and those watching the video pay attention to someone they recognise.

The third idea is a special Christmas landing page, AChurchNearYou.com, where you can add your services using the advent or Christmas tag²⁰. In 2021 AChurchNearYou.com received 77 million page views, with 80% of visitors being on the site for the first time. The Anglican Church used prepared social media posts and some advertising to help the public find out about services and events at their local church in December. Make sure the faithful can find the newly added content too. While on the AChurchNearYou website, you can also take advantage - with all events - of the improved buttons: "Share with a friend" and the "Add to calendar" function, to make it easier for visitors to plan their activities. In addition, when using the enhanced buttons to share links to each event on social media, an invitation graphic will appear. Using the above facilities, you will be able to share your ideas and invite the local community to celebrate together. Be mindful of the language you use when adding these services so that someone who has never been to church can understand. The busiest time on the website throughout the year is Christmas Eve; although Advent is over, it is never too late to update the website.

Idea four is an invitation to use the free graphics and template generator and a range of Great Invitation features (for example, Power Point slides) from the AChurchNearYou (ACNY) resource centre. Use of these resources is possible by logging in first. To invite family and friends to church, it is worth creating and using free content on your social media channels or adding links to events.

¹⁹ Rolls allow you to record and edit short videos of up to 90 seconds in the Instagram camera. You can add effects and music to the roll or use your own original audio.

²⁰ A Church Near You is the Anglican Church's website for finding churches, reaching both the faithful who often or rarely attend church services and those seeking faith. Each of the church's 16,500 churches has a page on the site that can be personalised and tailored to the needs of the community. The site is free to use and includes easy-to-use templates to create a website in minutes, promote services and events and access the Resource Centre, with which music, video and photos can be downloaded free of charge for use online and in print. "Although not a social media network, with more than 70 million page views in 2020, A Church Near You has become an essential part of any CofE church's online toolkit". *Creating and administrating a church social media account*, <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/digital-labs/blogs/creating-and-administrating-church-social-media-account#na> [11.04.2023].

The fifth idea encourages the expansion of posts containing information about Anglican Church activities with a local focus. The message of this year's campaign (2022) was to invite as many people as possible into the church. Many of the posts on the Anglican Church's website and social media were intended this year to encourage especially those who had not been to church for a long time or never. You can explain to them through digital media what the Christmas nativity scene is, for example, or why we light the candles on the Advent wreath. You can share posts explaining the importance of traditions, services and carols. You can communicate information about your own services and events on your social media channels.

Another idea, important for gaining believers, is *Your Great Invitation: get inspired by other churches* (published 20.12.2022). It constitutes 8 ideas for last-minute #FollowTheStar social posts²¹. Sharing posts showcasing the activities of other Anglican communities in the final days before Christmas and at Christmas can encourage people to consider attending services. If people can view, comment on and share posts about the celebrations, it can be a way of strengthening relationships with the local church. The material gathered in one year can be used in future years.

The 8 ideas published by The Digital teams consist of the following activities:

- Keep it simple - an open door (it is worth presenting an open, festively decorated church door);
- Show the preparation by including some interesting photographs (for example, making decorations);
- Starburst video (invite to advent prayer together by posting);
- Capture the smiles (post the smiling faces of the faithful having the power to convince others to share in the joys of Advent waiting and experiencing Christmas);
- Make it a prayer (post a short video of a prayer that touches hearts and encourages people to join in praying);
- Say thank you (thank you, for example on Facebook, for the Christmas time spent together in church - share this uniquely joyful experience);
- Transformation moment (show with Christmas props the transformation from waiting for the Saviour to rejoicing in His coming);
- Look back - to look forwards! (present, for example on Instagram, a report of the days lived inviting everyone to see it; a time of singing carols triggers the desire to join the singers).

²¹ The Digital Team, *Your Great Invitation: Get inspired by other churches*, <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/digital-labs/blogs/your-great-invitation-get-inspired-other-churches> [11.03.2023].

Summary

The purpose of this article was to present the current situation of the Anglican Church. Over the past two decades there have been many signs of a deepening crisis in this community. The Anglican Church has found itself in the midst of a painful decline in the number of people (especially reaching adulthood) who identify themselves as believers, as statistics show a steadily increasing trend towards a secular society. More than half of the population in England say they have no religion, and the generational gap in religious affiliation is widening. The Church is seeking to address these perceived problems through (among other things) new means of social communication. Digital means of communication are now seen as a means of social interaction and thus as a means of interactive influence. Of particular relevance in the Anglican Church's issued guidelines on the use of social media is the fact that some 255 million people use Twitter and over one billion people use Facebook. In such a situation, therefore, the Church cannot ignore media messages as a means of attracting the faithful to its local communities. The Church's suggestions for the Advent and Christmas experience outlined in the text confirm the use of digital media.

Amaris Cole – Head of Digital – has elaborated on five ways to include those who use new means of communication in the Church. The message prepared by believers and published in the social media fulfils many important functions:

- it explains the religious events taking place at specific liturgical periods;
- it encourages people to go to church to find joy and peace there;
- it contains testimonies of the Christian life, which is about people being guided by faith in their daily lives;
- it informs people about the time and manner of celebration in their immediate local community;
- it encourages prayer (praise, thanksgiving and supplication), through which people deepen their personal relationship with God.

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