

From Pokémon Go to Hashtags: how digital and social media is changing the Church

*What impact is social and digital media having on religion? Here **Bex Lewis** explores its impact on the Church. She finds that as the Church starts engaging its followers online it has become a space to debate issues, connect to others and reach people and, in turn, humanise the Church. Church activities are being taken back out into the online world and Church leaders have taken to digital platforms to speak out on social and political debates from Brexit to international terrorism. Public conversations have always been key for public theology but the Information Age we're living in means that many of these public conversations will today take place in the digital sphere.*

On 14th July, the Church of England posted a new blog post, entitled, **Why Your Church Needs to Know About Pokemon Go**, encouraging its congregation to consider the possibilities of the latest online 'craze', Pokemon Go, launched in the UK that day. The blog post sought to demonstrate both what the game is, and the possibilities for churches to get involved, as many, through an algorithm, have been designated as 'PokeStops' (real life buildings and landmarks that players have to visit) or 'PokeGyms' (where players can battle their Pokémon), and many of its members are playing. **Pokémon Go** is the first augmented reality app to hit mainstream – using a mix of digital data overlaid on 'real-world' data to provide an 'enhanced' and interactive experience for the user.



It's not strange for a large organisation to interact with its members and promote its message in this way. But the democratic nature of digital and social media is allowing the church to play a much more unusual role in such a traditionally hierarchical body, including getting involved in such trends from the opening moments.



In contrast to the conventional top-down model of preaching Christianity via trained priests, social media is enabling many ordinary Christians to have one-to-one conversations about their faith with non-believers. As one minister, Rev Pam Smith, author of [Online Mission and Ministry](#), put it to me:

“This provides a much more realistic picture of the church as a collection of followers of Jesus rather than a monolithic organisation which occasionally pronounces unfavourably on contemporary society and is, in turn, judged by its organisational failures. Jesus often encountered people individually. Social media gives us the same personal access to people. This is an every-member ministry, and it’s exciting and inspiring.”

Many established churches, such as the Anglican and Catholic churches, have moved from relying heavily on audience participation in their services over the last few hundred years, to a passive model where the congregation receives a presentation. In particular, the design of churches changed after the Reformation to reflect a wider cultural shift from a networked, social form of religion to one where spirituality was broadcast to **more passive consumers**. TV and radio have helped reinforce the idea that they would quietly receive information rather than interacting with the service.

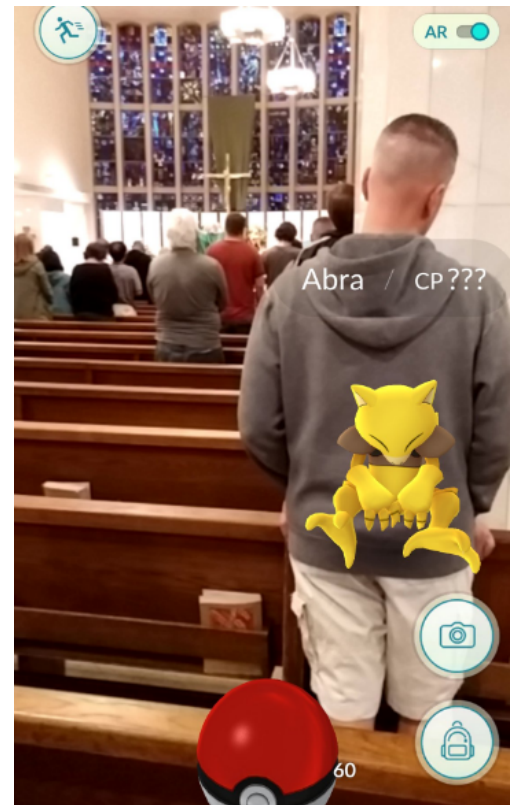
Similarly, while many churches are finally starting to understand that engaging their followers online is important, they **still need convincing** that the way to do this involves **more than just setting up a website**. Many of those in the church have bought into the idea that what happens online is virtual, rather than an embedded part of our everyday lives.

Online communities

Social media offers much more space for congregations to actively engage with sermons by tweeting along, asking questions, sharing photos of church activities, or continuing discussions throughout the week, not just on Sundays. For example, between 2010 and 2015, [the Big Bible Project](#) hosted online conversations about the bible for local reading groups and encouraged people to share digital case studies of personal experiences. The project questioned the reality of online spaces, encouraged faith sharing and questioned values and behaviour online, and looked at ways that Christians could make use of digital technology to change the world around them. More experimental parts of the church have held **online services** and **used streaming** to reach people who can’t be there in person.

As well as becoming part of church practice, social media is taking church activities back out into the online world. Faith is a full-time activity and social media is part of our everyday lives, so it is not surprising that the two can overlap. For example, church members can use Twitter to share **insights from the bible** or **stories of their lives** within the organisation, but they can also bring their Christian viewpoint to discussions on local, national and international **politics**.

Many small faith-based groups, determined to impact society, have been able to organise and publicise their causes online, offering potential big impacts in return for low-risk investments, including [Cities of Sanctuary](#) (creating a welcoming environment for refugees), [Christians at Pride](#) (organising a visible presence at London Pride), and [Love Your Neighbour](#) and [Movement of Love](#), both formed in July 2016 in response to **post-Brexit hatred**. Such groups make it easier for the

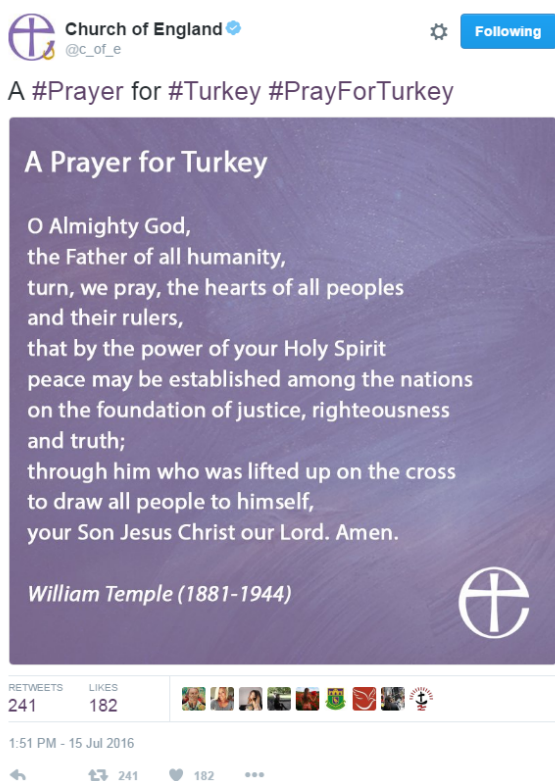


media to **find and identify activities**, although it certainly helps if the Pope or the Archbishop of Canterbury **speaks out publicly** on similar issues.

A sermon on the need to vote in 2001 focused upon the necessity to recognise earthly duties as a part of a heavenly community, messages echoed in more recent years in cartoons by Christian cartoonist Dave Walker. Walker's cartoons are shared widely online (not only by the Christian community) and include the **need to vote**, reasons to **vote remain**, and the **post Brexit to do list**. There are many active groups using the digital to encourage Christians to participate, including **Christians in Politics**, **God and Politics** (til 2014), **Christians on the Left**, **Christians in Parliament**, and all the political parties, such as the **Liberal Democrat Christian forum**. **The Contextual Theology Centre** states that "churches shouldn't be politicising, but helping produce members who are politicised."

Jewish Scholar Tony Bayfield **said**: "Being heard, having access to the public square and making good use of that access, contributing with reason, sensitivity, and humility to the public debate – that is the very essence of democracy. We people of faith can be faith democrats just as much as the divines of secularity." In learning how to engage online, it is important that faith organisations can help lead as well as participate, swiftly encouraging engagement, as with Pokemon, but also offering opportunities to be inspired by and learn from good practice, through events such as the annual **Premier Christian Digital Conference**.

Social media is helping to open up and humanise the church. Online conversations via the Twitter hashtag **#chsocm** are busy, **#ukchurchchat** is seeking to get going, and the Facebook group **Church Communcations** has nearly 3,000 members, many very active, seeking to improve the quality of official church communications. Churches are seeing that it is important to engage with secular topics, and particularly with tragic events around the world. In recent weeks the Church of England has been quick to post prayers of response, including this one for Turkey:



One noticeable hashtag in recent weeks used by many official accounts is **#newrevs**, allowing the outside world in on the sacred activity of ordinations.





Church of England Twitter

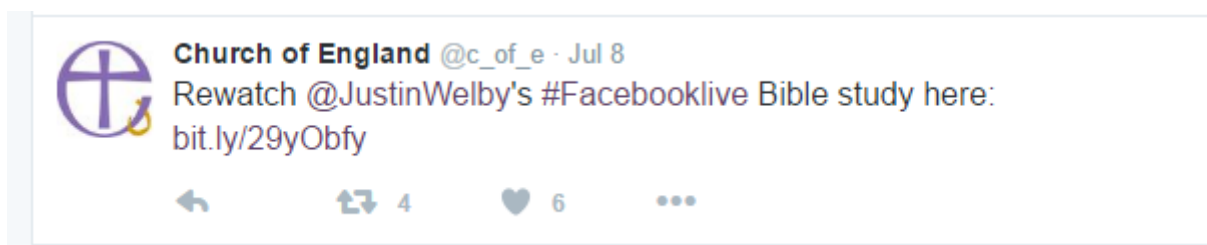
The distance and anonymity created between people when they communicate online can help **shed inhibitions** in a way that is often blamed for abusive behaviour. But it can also **encourage people** to become comfortable enough to ask questions about faith, especially via private messaging, and indeed to more publically share their own faith . The **humorous nature** of many social media posts can also act as a starting point for more serious discussions about religion.

Church leaders' involvement

Although much of this activity is happening outside the established hierarchy, some church leaders are noticing the opportunity social media creates to change their relationship with their members. The power and authority of leaders can be turned to positive use, although often attracting negative comments. We have watched **the Pope**, the **Archbishop of Canterbury**, cathedrals, churches and both lay and ordained leaders join Twitter and other social media, offering opportunities for 24/7 engagement. The Pope offers encouragement via digital accounts such as Twitter and Instagram, largely in a broadcast style:



whereas Justin Welby seems to have sought to make himself across a range of platforms, including as an early adopter of **Instagram**, available for **Facebook live speeches** post referendum, **selfies** with all kinds of people, and interactive Facebook Bible studies:



There are many opportunities to experiment with simple, inexpensive ideas. Facebook groups can give clear social and connection value, especially for those in their 20s and 30s and [parent/toddler groups](#). Churches have used photo and video sites such as [Instagram](#) and Vine to see what is going on inside their buildings. They've even also created [geocaches](#) – markers on online maps as part of an international orienteering movement – in their grounds to encourage people to visit... and Pokemon is very much in a similar category to geocaching.

Christian Facebook groups and twitter feeds have also been used to have political debates that have an impact on wider society. Theologian Sebastian Kim [says](#) “the key word for public theology is public conversation, contributing to the formation of personal decisions and collective policy-making in economic, political, religious and social realms, not confined to the Church.” The Information Age we're living in means that many of these public conversations will take place in the digital sphere.

Adapted and developed from a piece first published in [The Conversation](#).

About the author



Dr Bex Lewis is [Senior Lecturer in Digital Marketing](#) at Manchester Metropolitan University, and [Visiting Research Fellow](#) at St John's College, Durham University, with a particular interest in digital culture, and how this affects the third sector, especially faith organisations, voluntary organisations, and government behavioural campaigns. She is Director of social media consultancy Digital Fingerprint, and is author of 'Raising Children in a Digital Age'.

Banner image: Twitter, [Avatar Adrienne](#) and [StStephensRednal](#)

July 20th, 2016 | [Digital spaces](#), [Featured](#), [Latest](#) | [5 Comments](#)

