

A guide to using traditional telephone lines for church meetings and to broadcast recordings.



Keeping the internetless connected in a time of social distancing.

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Introduction

Almost 17 years ago, at the church I was attending at the time, a few of us were wanting to regularly meet together to pray for the children's work. The very same folk were also very busy and often weren't free for long at the same times. I came up with the idea of meeting over the phone - and we held a weekly prayer meeting using a conference call system. Everyone phoned the same number at the same time and we could all hear each other and hold our prayer meeting. In a time before smart phones or Skype had made an appearance, and the internet was still much much slower than today's standards, this seemed like an amazing use of technology!

Fast forward to today, and the online communication world couldn't have changed more. In the last few weeks we've seen churches clambering into apps like Zoom and Houseparty, exploring Facebook Live and YouTube Live amongst others, and very quickly even many of the technophobes of the church community have moved online.

But online doesn't work for everyone. Not everyone has access to such apps, or even if they do may not have the ability to use them effectively. But most people **can** dial an ordinary phone number.

I recently hooked out some of the old details I used for the telephone prayer meetings and have put them to use. I've been involved in a committee meeting that took place via a 0800 freephone conference call that would otherwise have been cancelled, and have also been putting daily holy week recordings that my church has been emailing out onto a recorded-message answerphone line for folk to call in and listen to. It received over 20 calls in the first day so clearly it's meeting a need.

I hope you find information here useful. Do get in touch if you need any help, and it would be great to hear about any successful use of church-by-phone ideas!

Stuart

Option 1: A "live" conference call for real time meetings/chats

With a conference call, you are simply making a phone call between lots of people rather than just two people. Instead of ringing each other, you all ring in to the same central phone number. Usually everyone will need to enter a code, and then everyone who calls the same number and enters the same code at the same time are all connected to each other. People can join or leave the call at any time. Callers are usually asked to record their name when they first call in, so their arrival (and departure) can be announced to the group.

If you just want this conference call option, then you are good to go immediately by using phone number **0330 321 3264** and making up your own 6 digit PIN code. Then just promote the time of your meeting. For example:

Weekly Telephone Prayer Meeting
for our Children's work and after schools clubs
throughout our local community.
Please join with us to pray for our children's staff
team as they share Jesus with the children of our town.
6:30pm every Tuesday in term time.
Call 0330 321 3264 and our PIN 878889
For further information, speak to Marcus, Nigel or Monica

This service does NOT use a premium rate number. Watch out for services that do. 0330 phone numbers are mandated by Ofcom to be chargable in exactly the same way as normal landline calls - so if landline calls are free or inclusive in your calls allowance/bundle then it must include 0330 phone numbers too.

Give the service a try now with a friend. The first caller to use any particular PIN code hears music until another caller joins them.

This service could even be used to hold virtual "tea and chat" afternoons and such similar social meet-ups.

Option 2: A simple "long outgoing message" answerphone line

This is a very simple type of telephone service. A normal answerphone works when you don't answer the phone, and an outgoing message is played and then the caller leaves a message.

You could do this using a normal phone line, buy an answerphone and record a message for callers to hear. This would work but would require paying regular line rental fees and buying equipment. Do it right and after a tiny set up cost it's completely free after that!

By setting up a **virtual answerphone line**, the actual phone line doesn't really exist. Your phone number goes to a central computer system and your outgoing message is played whenever anyone calls. You can record your outgoing message - and re-record it as often as you like - by calling in to the central computer, entering a special code, and recording your message.

You can set up a virtual answerphone line using any type of phone number. I would recommend using an ordinary geographic area code number - like (01223) for Cambridge or (0114) for Sheffield. If you are setting one up for your church, use your local area code to reflect the area your church is serving. You might find using an 0800 freephone number more appropriate, but a per-minute charge would apply as you, the owner, would pay rather than the caller. Just make sure you avoid any services using 08 or 09 numbers (other than 080x) as these are more expensive to call than ordinary phone numbers.

Lots of companies provide virtual phone numbers and can route them to a virtual answerphone service. Watch out for connection fees and hidden charges. If you are considering an 0800 option, be careful signing up to a monthly billed account as you can't control the number of incoming calls. If you get lots of "wrong numbers" phoning you it could cost you a lot of money. A pre-pay account limits your costs as it works like a pay-as-you-go mobile phone account, using up credit when folk call in and if the credit runs out it just stops working.

One company has always stood out for reliability and value which I am prepared to recommend.

Visit www.flextel.com/A127662/ to go to the Flextel website.

(NOTE: in the event of you spending any money this referral link may generate a recommend-a-friend bonus – please get in touch if you do as I will forward this on to you in full, I'm not trying to make money here, and you'd pay the same prices without the referral link anyway)

Go to the shop and find a 01, 02, 03 or 0800 number to buy.

Numbers will cost between £1 and £10 to buy depending on their popularity. Areas like Huntingdon (01480) Downham Market (01366) and The Hope Valley (01433) have numbers available for £1 due to low demand but in more metropolitan areas demand may be higher. You can buy a number for any area - it doesn't need to be the one you are geographically based in.

Through the Flextel online management portal, you can control and numbers you purchase. Set your number to a voicemail number to make it a virtual answerphone line. Also set a PIN code for the number. Then all you need to do is to record or upload your outgoing message. You can do this online or by phone.

Online method - log in to your flextel account, from the management dashboard click on the number you've purchased and there is an icon to upload a sound file.

NOTE: The size of the file is limited to 10MB and must be mp3 format. Some modern sound recording software will create sound files bigger than this, but due to the limited quality of an analogue telephone line, there is no point uploading a high definition sound recording. Reducing the quality down to 16kB/s (usually considered 'low quality') will be good enough for the phone line and allow a recording of over an hour in under 10MB.

Offline method - Call 0370 3210001 (normal landline rate) and when prompted enter your virtual phone number and PIN. You will have the option to record (or re-record) a greeting.

NOTE: If you pause for a few seconds it will think you've ended your recording - a possible difficulty for quiet prayer/reflection moments. You may need to use the sound file upload method in these instances.

An added flexibility of having your own phone number is that you can control how the number behaves. One click in the flextel portal and you can change your virtual answerphone into a conference call number for a "live" service or meeting, or even redirect it to another phone number. Some services may be chargeable (like forwarding the call to a mobile phone) and would require a "top-up" of credit adding. You can also temporarily turn the number off. Additionally, you can add more phone numbers to the same account. For example, you could add an 0800 number and allow folk that don't have access to inclusive phone calls the ability to call in at no cost. Or you could have a whole host of local virtual answerphone numbers for an entire circuit and allocate each church their own phone number and give them the PIN code to update the message. It could be a "talking notice sheet" service or a "thought for the day" message - this options are endless!

I hope this is useful. Please do get in touch if you need and help or support with getting anything going.