Report 1

When Pastors put on the "Tech Hat": How Churches Digitized during Covid-19

TECH IN CHURCHES DURING COVID-19

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Analyzing Churches Engagement with Technology During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Authored by:
The Network for New Media, Religion & Digital Culture Studies

When Pastors put on the "Tech Hat":
How Churches Digitized during Covid-19

Report 1 from *Tech in Churches during COVID-19 Research Project*

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Project Summary

The Analyzing Churches Engagement with Technology During the Covid-19 Pandemic research project investigates the role technology has played in churches during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, it studies how digital media use shaped the worship, outreach, and the outlook of congregations during this time. The study draws on data collected by the Center for Congregations in Indianapolis during 2020-2021, through its Connect Through Tech grant program. The Center provided funding to approximately 2700 congregations in the state of Indiana to purchase technology resources to help facilitate their move from traditional to online forms of worship during the pandemic.

By analyzing demographic data, reports and narratives provided by grant awardees, the project seeks to map how and why various digital media technologies and strategies were implemented by these churches to serve their communities during social distancing. The full study involves the analysis of grant program materials and case studies of different congregations' technological innovation and negotiation strategies. The overall goal is to investigate the theological and social implications of these technological choices and consider the long-term impact they might have on congregational vitality and mission.

Context of Report and Overview of Research

Findings discussed in this report are based on analysis and themes drawn from online discussions held by the Center for Congregations (CfC) with congregations who received technology grants from them during the pandemic. After churches were thrust into the online world in the beginning of the pandemic, the Center for Congregations began offering the opportunity for churches to apply for $5000 Connect Through Tech grants to be utilized towards purchasing digital equipment to livestream or record church services. The CfC held 33 sessions in Fall 2020 and 17 "Tech Talk" sessions in Spring 2021. These 50 sessions created a space for church

leaders from congregations who had received these grants to share about their experiences and challenges with implementing their new technology. These sessions were led on Zoom by CfC staff members who invited church leaders, volunteers, or staff members who oversaw running the church's digital media and technology for the congregations who received funds from the Connect Through Tech 2020 grant program. Typically, two to eight individuals took part in each of these online conversations with two staff members from the CfC. Altogether, the number of congregational attendees for the Tech Talks totaled 478 in the fall 2020 and spring 2021 sessions.

The aim of these sessions was to provide congregations who received their technology grant during the COVID-19 pandemic a chance to interact with staff from the CfC and get input on the technologies they had purchased and the online service strategies they were implementing. Session leaders were interested to hear how the church leaders were doing with the grant monies and how the Center for Congregations could better support the small churches and congregations participating in this program.

The sessions lasted one hour each and consisted of introductions, questions about congregational tech usage during the pandemic, and a Q&A discussion at the end of the session. The Q&A time allowed participants to ask staff questions about best practices regarding technology implementation. Staff members organized each Tech Talk session around a set of questions:

-Tech Talks Sessions Guiding Questions-
1) Who are the people that make the technological decisions within the church?
2) What challenges have you faced?
3) What unexpected successes have you seen?
4) What does the future hold?

Other questions raised at the end of the session included: "What do we [the CfC] not know that we don't know?" By this, the staff wanted to know what challenges or experiences churches were encountering in the middle of the pandemic that the Center was not aware of or had not been addressed yet in that conversation. Other questions were related to how the CfC could better support churches through resources, programs, and livestreams.

Analysis of these sessions focused primarily on responses made by participants related to their congregation's technological decisions, as well as reports on successes and failures related to conducting worship services online. Special attention was also paid to frustrations, technological challenges, and specific needs encountered by pastors or technology volunteers within the church. Additionally, any specific populations or unique situations that required innovative technological problem-solving were also noted. Special attention was also paid to any points of agreement among the congregational leaders when they were responding. Respondents were from very different churches, from rural, suburban & urban and over 20 different denominations, yet their responses overlapped and echoed one another on a number of key questions explored in this report. These questions, which define the five sections of this report, include:

-Report 1 Core Questions-

(1) **Who are the people making technological decisions within churches right now?**

(2) **What challenges have churches faced in using and implementing technology during the Pandemic?**

(3) **What were the prominent issues churches encountered in their transitioning of services into a new platform and a new culture?**

(4) **Are there any success stories worth noting or examples of unexpected outcomes or results of using technology?**

(5) **Is technology use in church worship or ministry described as a something to do simply to get through pandemic restrictions, or as a potential long-term strategy?**

This opportunity to hear directly from pastors, volunteers, staff members, and other church leaders provided invaluable insight into what really was occurring within churches during the COVID-19 pandemic regarding their technological decision-making processes. Most people knew that the pandemic affected churches, as the CfC can attest having received 2688 grant applications between April 15 to May 15 in 2020. Yet hearing directly from the individuals "in the trenches" doing the work provided concrete stories that help to paint a more detailed picture of what small churches were experiencing. Many were thrust into a territory they had never been before, as using digital technology and going online was often the only way for churches to continue their ministries online.

This report presents its findings in terms of responses to the key research questions outlined at the beginning of this study. Below we introduce each question, followed by a summary response revealed through the data. Next, we highlight key themes emerging from our exploration of these questions and offer a fuller explanation with concrete examples noted in these "Tech Talk" sessions by various respondents.

(1)
Who are the people making technological decisions within churches right now?

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the people tasked with making the difficult decisions regarding technology amid social distancing and lockdowns were found to typically be the church pastors and church volunteers. Importantly, almost all the individuals were unfamiliar with technology, running digital equipment, and utilizing social media.

Pastors
Pastors or priests were often the primary people to select, manage, and oversee the use of technology in the church. Serving in the "tech role" for their church typically meant they had to learn how to use the cameras, figure out the sound equipment required, and physically set up the technology so that they could broadcast their Sunday sermon. Many of these pastors or priests shared a sense of dedication and determination that they would do whatever it takes to share the Gospel and serve their congregation. However, many also shared a general sense of fatigue that they are doing too much and need more sustainable forms of help.

For many churches, the lead pastors or priests juggle not only leading a congregation, preaching on Sundays, and planning sermons; they also were tasked with *actually* setting up the equipment and starting their own livestream before preaching a message. One pastor described himself as attempting to balance many roles while also "wearing the tech hat." Pastors often feel they are fulfilling more duties than their pastorate can handle.

Many pastors stated that the shift online just created more duties, tasks, and frustrations for them as many had to learn to navigate this shift by themselves without help. One senior pastor from a Baptist church in Monticello explained that his greatest challenge is that his new technology tasks require a significant amount of time and effort and all the while, he still oversees his congregation and sermons. He described it as "adding more and taking nothing off the docket." Pastors are reaching the point where they experience the technological shift as creating more difficulty for their jobs, especially when they are the ones who must do it all.

One Episcopal priest from Indianapolis described feeling exhaustion, weariness, and fatigue. She explained that the worship services had been falling flat over the internet and she had not experienced them as meaningful. After setting up and running the technology herself as the main priest, she explained that it just "wasn't the job I signed up for." She is experiencing the effects of being overworked, underprepared, and longing for someone to take the role as the "tech guy" who is comfortable with technology so that she can return to her role as a shepherd.

ON TECHNOLOGICAL DECISION MAKERS

"Time and time again, churches' technology is being utilized by people who are willing to try but are largely intimidated and greatly unfamiliar with the digital world."

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Numerous examples of discomfort were reported by pastors who encountered a vast and unexpected tech learning curve during the pandemic. One pastor from Plainville explained that if he could hire anyone right now, it would be an "online campus pastor" since having to both pastor the in-person and the online congregation has created significant difficulties. He felt that the role of managing both would require (however unlikely) an entire role dedicated to its upkeep. Another pastor from a Missionary Baptist Church in Evansville described how the entire staff would describe themselves as "just novice" even after moving online. He explained that online worship required much more than they had expected, especially as an older staff and congregation.

Volunteers

Many churches, small and large alike, are largely run by a group of congregants who give up their time, resources, and energy to serve a role within the church. These individuals fulfill several positions inside the building from childcare to the greeting team. Volunteers that fulfill the "tech role" are typically offering up their services amid their busy work schedules. They run the camera(s), set up the equipment, and research technology so that the service can stream at the highest quality. Often, these individuals are younger members of the church, with many of them being teenagers. They all share a sense of dedication to making sure the church can be the church during the pandemic but also a sense of intimidation as they navigate a high-pressure area with little preparation.

During the pandemic, many volunteers made decisions about, set-up, and utilized digital equipment. One church volunteer described working a full 50 to 60-hour week of work and then being tasked with running the livestream to keep the church's Sunday services online. Many faithful volunteers admitted feeling incredibly burned out and overwhelmed. Other pastors explained that children and teenagers who knew how to work technology stepped up and were willing to help the church out when they could.

One pastor from a church in Plainville explained that his 12-year-old daughter runs the camera most Sundays because she is more experienced with technology than he or any of the staff is. When she is out of town or busy, his other daughter takes over for him. Overall, there is a lack of volunteers who are capable or willing to run the technology, so his daughters are necessary for the broadcasting service each week.

Individuals Unfamiliar with Tech
Time and time again, churches' technology is being utilized by people who are willing to try but are largely intimidated and greatly unfamiliar with the digital world. These people seem to share a similar desire to help, serve, and learn. They demonstrate both an intimidation as well as a sense of bravery as they navigate a world that they know very little about. Overall, all the volunteers, individuals, priests, elders, and pastors admitted that pre-pandemic, they were grossly ill-adept at running technology. Many of them have never used cameras or microphones before but all showed a willingness to learn for the sake of the church.

What challenges have churches faced in using and implementing technology during the Pandemic?

The lockdowns and safety protocols necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic created a multitude of challenges for churches. Consistently, churches struggled with serving and caring for the elderly who were not only isolated physically, but many of them were unable to access or utilize technology. Pastors explained that they were overwhelmed with many technological duties and they found much difficulty in locating volunteers who were willing and able to help. Other church leaders felt overwhelmed as they tried to navigate which technology to purchase, issues with livestreaming, fostering community in an online setting, and attempting to move churches online starting at the bare minimum while also trying to convince some "anti-digital" congregants or leaders to participate in online ministries. Below are several prominent and common issues churches encountered when trying to adopt new digital technologies, platforms, and social media practices.

Challenges in Helping Elderly Members with Technology
As the world moved online in spring 2020, one major theme that emerged for pastors and church leadership was how to respond to the technology questions and issues from the elderly members of the congregation. They explained that older congregants seemed to struggle during this move online with learning how to navigate computers, technology, and livestreaming for the first time in their lives. For many seniors, attempting to navigate an online world out of choice was hard enough, but doing it out of necessity proved even more challenging. Church leadership found difficulty attempting to maintain the connections of the elderly who were often without any technology awareness, equipment, or knowledge. They deeply sought to remain invested in their local church but often found the task of navigating the online world severely overwhelming. One woman commented on the difficulties of this population not having access to computers or Wi-Fi. Their church has attempted to brainstorm ways to create decent connection within this community but has found a lack of technology knowledge to be the greatest hindrance. Church leadership was tasked with attempting to aid the senior community with learning, accessing, and successfully utilizing technology so that they could remain a part of the congregation as well as gain access to Sunday services.

Questions about What Equipment to Buy

Many pastors and church leaders explained the struggle in attempting to decide whether to use Facebook Live, YouTube, or Zoom to stream their messages. They felt overwhelmed and ill-equipped to make the decision. Often, they longed to reach out to other churches to learn from them but found that to be difficult and confusing. Because of this, they typically did the research themselves but often it came with challenges, mistakes, and live glitches. One pastor explained being unsure when tasked with having to decide, but ultimately deciding on what the church nearby used. These questions seem to confront many newly "online" churches.

Some leaders also explained that when the world shifted to the digital in March/April 2020, much of the equipment that they needed to utilize was backordered and unavailable due to the influx of digital resources needed around the country. This created challenges for transitioning churches online as they just waited for the resources that they needed so that they could transition online.

Concerns over Copyright

One consistent theme that emerged out of many of the church narratives regarded issues of understanding and purchasing copyright for their worship services. In the process of moving online, many church leaders were unaware of the copyright laws regarding livestreaming music. Questions emerged of what exactly the laws related to copyright are and what the best copyright protection is. In uploading sermons onto Facebook or YouTube, leaders would be unaware that they needed copyright licensing or song protection and would have

CHALLENGES IMPLEMENTING TECHNOLOGY FOR CHURCHES

TECH IN CHURCHES DURING COVID-19

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their sermons removed from the site. Even though churches may have paid for a licensing subscription to use music in onsite worship, the specific terms and policies of YouTube and Facebook for online worship services override other music licensing policies and protections. One pastor explained that his sermon was removed from Facebook when he had not realized he had violated copyright laws in the worship set at the beginning of the service.

Moving to Online Platforms Starting from Nothing

Some leaders described not having a single piece of equipment for livestreaming when the pandemic hit in 2020. One church minister explained the challenges of having to learn technology, purchase equipment, and get the online ministry started when utilizing almost no previous experience or "build up" for their supply. He had to move a church completely online with no equipment, resources, or know-how. One pastor from a United Church explained that he did not even have a website for his church pre-pandemic. He said they were "old school and proud of it." However, when COVID-19 shut down his church, he was able to join workshops about which equipment to buy and start to create high quality online worship opportunities.

Another pastor explained that when COVID-19 pandemic shut down their church, they had no digital equipment for streaming. The pastor had to quickly innovate, using a camera and streaming her first service online from within her home, before receiving a Center for Congregations' grant. A Methodist pastor recalled that she had to lend her own personal digital camera to the church at the start of the pandemic, because the church had no other digital resources available. Issues like this were common among church leaders. Another pastor described duct taping a borrowed cellphone to a ladder to stream a sermon at the beginning of the shutdown. Stories like these show many churches did not have access to the internet or even basic recording equipment such as a smartphone when the first lockdown started.

Working with Live Technology Issues

Some church leaders and pastors explained they had issues with on-air errors as the church livestreamed their service. One woman from a church acknowledged the struggles with learning how to best stream Sunday worship in a way that is clean as her church has been facing difficulties with sound and visuals cutting out due to the lack of high-speed internet where the church is located. She has noticed the poor quality of her service but has not known how to best remedy them. Addressing issues with cameras, direct cable lines, and visual and audio quality issues seem to be the most pressing. Lack of broadband access was noted as a significant issue in many places both in rural and urban settings in Indiana. One pastor described individual recording the service in the church sanctuary, but and then having to go to the parking lot of the public library to upload the recorded content, because the library had the best internet access in the community.

A priest from a Catholic Church explained that despite the issues and glitches they had been experiencing, "the bottom line is that we are not trying to create a beautiful,

glossy process as much as we are all together and human and trying to reach out to a population that needs faith and support." By being online, even in messy, imperfect ways, they were still impacting people all around the world.

What were the prominent issues churches encountered in their transitioning of services into a new platform and a new culture?

To conform to the public health rules and regulations during the COVID-19 pandemic, the most significant challenge faced by pastors and church leadership was how to best navigate the new digital context from fully offline to fully online. This brought with it issues in navigating the volunteer roles required (and finding them), attempting to adjust as a church body to the online atmosphere, and establishing a sense of familiarity and connection in the digital realm. For many, this meant completely re-thinking what Sundays look like and adjusting to a new culture that requires flexibility and an ability to navigate technology. In this section, we highlight the main challenges that church leadership faced: finding volunteers to run technology, encountering largely anti-technology congregations or staff members, and the difficulties associated with maintaining a sense of community in a digitally-mediated context.

Finding Volunteers
One theme found throughout the Tech Talks was how pastors and church leaders were attempting to navigate ways to recruit congregants who were willing to volunteer and help with technology. This proved difficult even pre-pandemic, but with the new tasks and technological demands required for these volunteer positions, pastors had an even harder time finding people who were not only able but also willing to learn new equipment. A variety of issues confront these leaders from long-term volunteers being tired or not having a pro-volunteer or service culture within the church. Below, we discuss the main two themes found that faithful volunteers are experiencing fatigue and that the culture of the church and its approach to volunteerism has effects on the response to this call.

Faithful volunteers are burned out.
Church pastors explained that many of their volunteers that are the sole individuals that run the services on Sunday are experiencing intense burnout as they navigate their personal lives, real-life jobs, and the tasks involved with volunteering for a church mid-pandemic. They feel emotionally exhausted, physically fatigued, and an overall weariness as they feel overworked and underprepared. These individuals did not ask for these new roles but volunteered happily. They now are seeing the build-up of over a year of work that is unpaid, and they are underprepared for.
Individuals were attempting to navigate a pandemic while also volunteering to complete tasks and run equipment that they had never tried before. This took a toll on

their emotional health as they worked week after week without a break. One Catholic priest described how he fully runs the services every week, both preaching and doing technology production. He runs cameras, microphones, and the livestream while he preaches the sermon. He explained that he created a step-by-step binder of information about how to set up the equipment and run the technology for people to utilize so that he can go on vacation. Similar themes were found in many of the narratives of leaders as there is a general fear of being away from the church on a Sunday because people may not know how to run the equipment.

Cultivating a culture of service may impact the volunteers.
According to some church leadership, volunteers' agreeableness or self-sacrifice seemed to be impacted by the importance of serving within the church. In a period when so many volunteers needed to step up in ways like never before, church leadership attempted to navigate how to create a culture that promoted service in hopes that this emphasis would encourage even more individuals to volunteer and give their energy, time, and resources. Some churches have had to emphasize the importance of service in hopes of shifting the response. One pastor explained that if he could just create an environment where service to others became the standard, people might start showing up more and giving their time.

Dealing with Anti-Technology Staff or Congregations
A consistent theme found in the narratives of multiple church leaders or pastors was the challenge of engaging with "anti-digital" congregants or leaders. A pastor from Plainville discussed a group of people within his congregation who were without a computer or the internet and "proud of it." Another pastor described the attempt to convince certain members to utilize the internet for church as having to "change the culture of the church." One staff member from a Jewish synagogue explained that her greatest difficulty was getting people in the community "on board" with the digital shift.

CHURCHES TRANSITIONING TO DIGITAL CULTURE

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It seems that a shift online for church leaders was met with hesitancy, intimidation, and apprehension by both their fellow staff members and their congregation.

Maintaining Community Online

Consistent themes emerged during the Tech Talks of church leadership finding it difficult to learn, create, and maintain a sense of community in an online setting. For many churches, figuring out how to create a "Sunday morning feeling" in a digital livestream was daunting and challenging. Pastors expressed difficulty in attempting to create a sense of connection for congregants when they were not in a face-to-face, in-person environment. Some pastors explained that they utilized Zoom so congregants would have opportunities to see one another, use the chat box, and send reactions (emojis) during the service. These sorts of decisions and negotiations were common among leaders who desired the same sense of familiarity and check-ins that make a church community a vital community.

Online services as actually less community?

Pastors seemed frustrated and exhausted when explaining the difficulties that come with both conceptualizing and fostering online community. One pastor shared his concern and questions surrounding what community is definitionally in a time of social distancing and lockdown. A part-time communications director at a small church emphasized the difficulty of keeping community with an online audience. He explained how the church is struggling to address questions of community within the livestream audience as well as implement online opportunities for youth groups and outreach ministries.

One priest from an Episcopal church explained that he does not find "technology meaningful." This shift from in-person services to online worship has felt unnatural, forced, and difficult. For him, online does not mean community; it really feels like less of a real community and more of a composed one. The disembodied form of community does not feel like "real" community to everyone.

One staff member from a church described how the challenge with navigating online church is creating a congregation of people that do not just "show up and watch." He found online resources that allowed for chats and breakout rooms to be the greatest opportunity to resist this type of passive community because it fostered actively continuing discussions, conversations, and friendship. Themes were consistent among the pastors of people hoping to create an online environment that resembled the moments before a real-life Sunday service where people hugged, caught up, and encouraged one another.

Are there any success stories worth noting or examples of unexpected outcomes or results of using technology?

While there were many challenges, pastors and church leaders expressed the many successes and positive outcomes that they experienced during church online in a global pandemic. Overwhelmingly, pastors were shocked by the reach that online services offered them. Through livestream, churches can create connections and stay in touch with members (both former and current) and with people entirely new to them who live nearby or far away. Individuals also shared their "proud" moments of learning technology, working Zoom, or becoming innovative with their work in an unprecedented time.

Success: Expanding External Reach through Moving Online
Commonly cited among most church leaders was their surprise and even shock with the reach that online worship enabled them to have. As most churches found themselves situated in small, simple buildings in rural areas of the Midwest, it seemed unlikely that they would ever reach anything far beyond their four walls. With the shift online, churches were shocked to discover the ways that an online service can become a wide-reaching net to whoever is interested in tuning in or watching. One pastor described this widening reach and shift as "shut- ins being no longer shut out." This reality, that an online livestream can reach multitudes of people in other counties, states, and even countries, was unthinkable for many individuals pre-pandemic. However, with technology, small churches are realizing the impact that the internet has for them.

One pastor from a church in Fort Wayne noted that people were tuning in to worship from different states, former members were able to watch from their new cities, and people who were typically haphazard attendees were now regularly participating. This was a consistent theme among pastors and church leadership alike: people are tuning in and making small town churches wide-reaching churches.

One youth pastor/tech guru indicated that he would have never thought they could create a "global" church in Monticello. He began seeing increasing numbers of people tuning in, people in different cities watching, and previous members chatting in the online message board. Pastors realized what the power of the internet was in the COVID-19 pandemic with a few simple technological pieces such as a camera and a microphone.

Success: Zoom as Revolutionary and Pivotal

One theme that emerged from the Tech Talks was an incredible sense of appreciation for the application Zoom and the resources it provides. Zoom, the online platform comparable to Skype, allows people to connect and meet via the internet. It became an integral part of the way that people stayed connected in schools, businesses, and communities. For churches, Zoom's specific features provided incredible opportunities for them to function almost as normal. One church pastor described how breakout rooms in Zoom have provided an incredible sense of community within their church membership. Individuals can talk about life, catch up, and greet members like they would if they were sitting in pews. He described that getting to "sit in" dorms, living rooms, and kitchens with people via Zoom has provided a sense of true connection that is "more personal." Overall, Zoom offers a closer sense of community, even from afar.

One rector explained that even without COVID-19, many people would "skip church due to inclement weather" or have other valid excuses for not attending in person. With the resource of Zoom, people can maintain a connection without ever leaving their homes. They have found their online attendance to be much more consistent than onsite was before the pandemic.

Zoom allowed for pastors to create connections online, for discussions to take place among congregants in breakout rooms, and for members of the church to feel like they were a part of the service as they clapped for their pastors. This was an unexpected success as many of the leaders haphazardly landed on Zoom because that is what the world seemed to be shifting to. However, this proved to be an important piece of the move online for small, digitally overwhelmed churches.

Success: Innovation & Tech Expansion during Lockdown

Despite moving online in the middle of a pandemic having significant challenges, some pastors and church leaders felt that it provided opportunities for innovation and creativity. Moving online gave some people "space to be creative" and think "outside the box." One pastor described bagging individual communion wafers for a drive-in

Easter service with pride and hosting a drive-in Sunday worship service. For many individuals, COVID-19 offered an excuse to be creative and come up with refreshed ideas for the church.

Other church leaders described the COVID-19 pandemic eliciting a shift online as also providing opportunities to expand their digital resources and equipment. One pastor from Fort Wayne explained that upgrades that their church had been delaying like slow Wi-Fi, poor cable connections, old equipment, 1990s webcams, they were able to do thanks to the grant during this time.

Unexpected Outcomes: Connecting with Previous Members
Another theme that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic for churches related to the re-emergence of many previous members to the online platform. Many pastors were shocked when they saw familiar names in the chat box or familiar faces on the screens. Often these individuals found it easier or more convenient to view church online, had moved away and could no longer attend, or were old members of the church who no longer attended services. This came as a surprise to many church leaders as they had not realized the benefits that the digital world offers for far off, far away, or previous church loved ones. One pastor explained that one person that he had not seen in years was able to Zoom in. Another leader described what joy it was to see the "regulars" as part of the service again. Many of these regulars are past members who have moved away, seniors who have learned to use Zoom and were previously unable to drive, people in other countries, and even members of the pastor's family in other states.

One Catholic priest described feeling "real gratitude" for online resources. He described being able to connect with people who used to attend but because they still did not feel safe while coronavirus was circulating, could maintain their community via the internet. Themes were consistent among church leaders that the internet provided an important, even sacred, opportunity to continue to be the Church amid social distancing and lockdown guidelines.

Unexpected Outcomes: Livestream Creating Connections
Some church pastors and leaders explained that the quality of online engagement determines the participation of church members. They found many people disengaged, became distracted, or were unimpressed by poor streaming quality or glitching errors throughout the livestreamed service. This created a desire for church leaders to

provide high quality streaming experiences so that people can get the message of the Gospel in a clear, undistracting way.

Themes emerged from churches regarding how without livestream, many churches would not have been able to maintain their connection or community. One pastor from La Grange rejoiced for the resources that digital media allow. He stated that "without a website, we would have lost our community." He explained how the internet was a vital resource for keeping their community afloat during the COVID-19 pandemic.

One church pastor did not realize how well-received the traditional service would be online. He explained that services typically have comments throughout the entire sermon emulating real-life community of members catching up, checking in on each other, and asking how relatives are. He was inspired by seeing this as he realized how online church can closely resemble "real" church, even in mediated ways.

Unexpected Outcomes: New Conceptualizations of What "Church" Is

Pastors expressed concern regarding whether "online church" could truly be incorporated into the real definition of "church." Questions of community, embodiment, and missions emerged for pastors as they attempted to navigate the shift online. Many church leaders expressed concern related to the real mission of the church as a gathered body while others expressed liturgical questions related to key traditions. One pastor asked, "Is 'video church' the same community, body, and resource" that we are supposed to emulate in the Bible? Church leaders wonder if this

UNEXPECTED OUTCOMES BECAUSE OF TECHNOLOGY

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version of church meets the definition of church that they hold on to, and if not, if that definition can be changed. Some pastors expressed interest in what the core components of a church are and if or how that can be translated online. Most pastors were interested in the idea of online church but seemed to express a sense of hesitancy when considering the larger conceptualization of church. They found
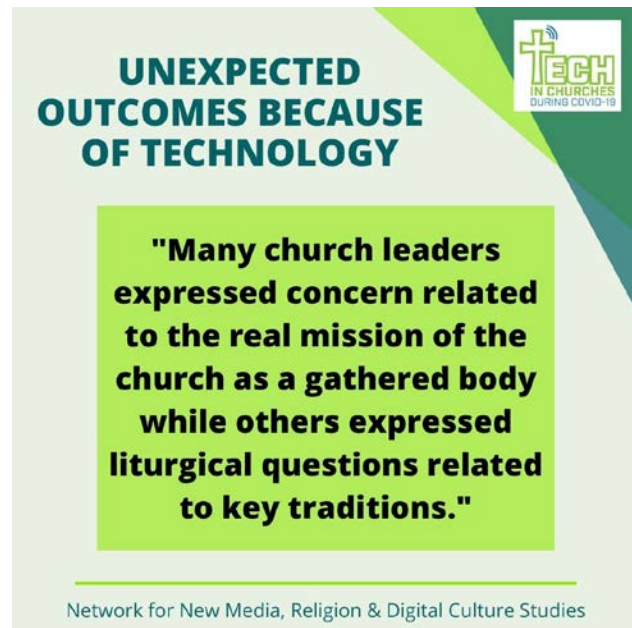
themselves asking questions related to if the online church meets some of the main notions of what a church should entail.

Is technology use in church worship or ministry described as a something to do simply to get through pandemic restrictions, or as a potential long-term strategy?

It became clear in the Tech Talks that pastors, church leaders, and staff are all overwhelmed and deeply concerned about what the future holds for their churches. Overall, pastors and church leaders rarely knew what the future held for their church. More questions seemed to emerge than answers. Questions included whether congregations should return fully online, fully offline, or in hybrid form, what the implications are for moving online, and finally, and potentially most importantly, what the liturgical implications of online worship are.

Is the Future Online, Offline and/or Hybrid?
Technology experimentation raised the question: what should stay in the return to online services and the maintenance of online ones? Nearly every pastor identified the questions about the return from the fully online to the hybrid as being intimidating. These pastors emphasized the questions about "what should stay" but maybe more importantly, the question was: "what should go?" Most pastors maintained a desire to "keep it intimate" in that they wanted the online worship to closely resemble the offline worship in style and impact. However, questions remain about what this should *actually* look like, how to keep both platforms thriving, and how staff can go about creating this.

A major question and theme among church leadership is how to balance, in the long run, both in-person and livestreamed services. One church pastor identified this as his greatest challenge for the church. Most pastors agreed that this new "hybrid" approach (although defined differently by different pastors) brought with it intimidating challenges and technological questions. One pastor explained this challenge by asking his staff, "do we want to be a video church?" He went on to explain, "this changes our trajectory as a body." It seems that becoming a "video church" requires different aspects of leadership from pastors, additional staffing, and roles changing, which church leaders wondered if they were ready for.

Other pastors asked more liturgical questions regarding what online worship *should* look like in terms of maintaining integrity with their beliefs. Questions of sacraments and confessions came up for congregations. How could Palm Sunday take place with one individual camera? How could sacred moments be kept sacred in a disembodied form of worship? Questions remained asked and were left largely unanswered.

Even just in terms of equipment or logistics, church leadership wondered how this would even be possible. Running a fully online service brought with it incredible challenges. How would they learn to do both at the same time? One pastor explained his frustration with figuring out where to place cameras and microphones in a hybrid setting. They all agreed that many of their questions regarding online worship revolved around technology.

LONG-TERM IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY ENGAGEMENT

"A major question and theme among church leadership is how to balance, in the long run, both in-person and livestreamed services."

Network for New Media, Religion & Digital Culture Studies

Some felt strongly that online worship was not the "best" and were looking forward to being offline eventually. One explained that their primary focus, post-pandemic, would be on those "in attendance," whereas the second priority would be those tuned in online. Themes like this were found throughout the Tech Talks as church leaders seem to hierarchically categorize onsite and online worship. In-person services consistently ranked higher and of greater importance than online.

One pastor acknowledged how there was a more vulnerable group of congregants who, even after the COVID-19 pandemic, would still be required to watch online for whatever reason (those who are immunocompromised, elderly, etc.). This meant for church leaders that if they wanted to serve these communities, they still needed to be committed to online worship in one form or another so that people could tune in from home. This brings in new challenges for leadership. One priest noted the challenge to find someone to take over the role of running cameras because it is not sustainable for the pastor to run the services every week. Long term questions remain for churches regarding the reality of hybrid worship for those who want to try it for the vulnerable.

Some church members indicated that online worship is the "new normal" despite ever-changing norms. One pastor explained that online services will not go away, but his church must learn to adapt better to having a "both/and" mentality. That means that, as much as some may want it to, online resources are still available and people have now experienced livestreaming, for better or for worse, so he thought that online church was a reality more than a preference.
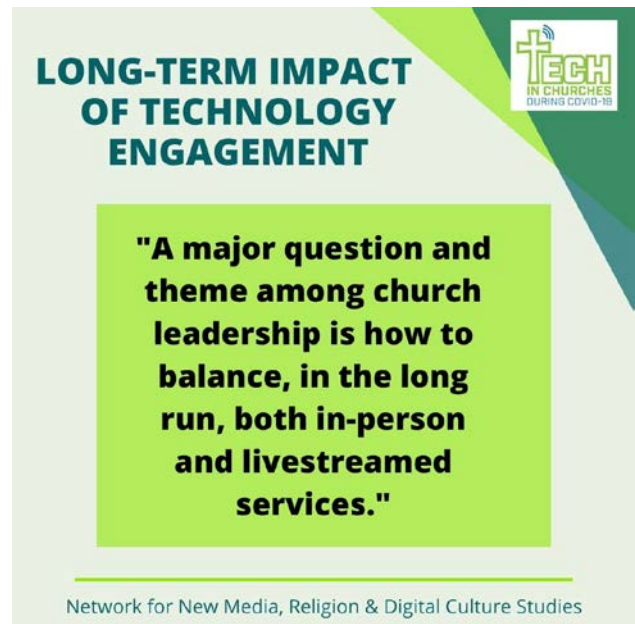
Some church leaders indicated that they felt online worship detracted from in-person meaningful experiences and allowed for people who are on the fringe to become complacent. They wondered if maintaining a hybrid presence will not challenge those to actually come through the doors and therefore reduce their experience of what really makes a church.

The Question Remains: "Will People (*Especially* Young Ones) Come Back?"
One theme that emerged in the Tech Talks related to pastors' concerns about the shift to in-person services. Specifically, many pastors worried that younger people will see the ease, comfort, and benefits of fully online worship, and because of this, not return to in-person services. Many pastors saw the slow re-emergence of church congregants and simultaneously experienced the benefits of the livestreamed church. They expressed concern about the reality that some people may just not see the benefits of in-person worship outweighing the benefits of online worship. One pastor joked that she did not want to make the online services too high-quality because you "…got to screw up sometimes because if it is so good, they will not come back." Some have decided definitely, "not everyone is going to come back" while others are hopeful that they will.

This reality that individuals may not return to in-person church services became a significant fear as pastors and church leaders realized their community and congregation could be impacted by this shift in conceptualizing church. For the first time for many people, they realized that "church" could be something other than a Sunday morning, in-person experience. It could be a Sunday morning from the couch experience, or it could even be a Monday afternoon in the car experience as they listened to archived services. This reality for pastors became a looming, even threatening one as they realized the future of their church could look different if individuals, especially younger ones who can work with technology easily, decided they did not desire to return to church as normal.

Implications of Moving Online for Church Culture
Another theme that emerged as pastors navigated this season is how COVID-19 might affect the role and culture of the church, even post-pandemic. As people questioned what type of care the church should be offering in a period of global grief, other pastors wondered if people would be returning in-person. One church pastor wondered what other churches were doing, was concerned about what a return during the grief related to COVID-19 deaths would look like, and how to change the narrative of what a post-pandemic church looks like. His concern about how his congregation

was learning to cope and would learn to cope post-pandemic was obvious. Questions such as how to provide adequate grief counseling or care services were themes found in the Tech Talks.

Some leaders wondered if people would even return to in-person services when the ease of online worship was seen. Concerns were around the "snow-birds," the young people, or the comfortable who found no reason to attend in-person anymore given the benefits of watching online from the comfort of their own homes. Leaders wondered what this would mean for the future of their congregations. Overall, a sense of "unknown" about the church emerged along with curiosity about what ways the pandemic would alter the function and culture of the church.

Challenges: Liturgical Implications of Technology Use
A consistent theme among some leaders was questions regarding the liturgical implications and biblical integrity of online worship. One priest from an Episcopal church expressed a lack of true connection in liturgical services and on the first Lent Sunday. She stated the service "felt flat." She identified it could be her age and lack of skills because she recognizes the importance of online church but struggles with it personally. Some felt that the online services did not translate the meaning, power, and sacred nature of many traditions.

One pastor asked what the liturgical implications of online worship *should* look like in terms of maintaining integrity with the church's beliefs (i.e., Baptism, the Eucharist, etc.). Another minister from Indianapolis explained his concerns regarding maintaining sacramental conviction in an online setting without compromising or betraying "who we are as a church confessionally" and "being able to provide theologically sound options" for the parish. He was unsure what this would or *should* look like in a digital worship setting. Liturgical questions seemed to face many individuals from more traditional backgrounds and played a role in their decision-making process regarding if and how they were to maintain hybrid worship.

Reflecting on "Navigating the Pandemic: A First Look at Congregational Responses" Report

In the report "Navigating the Pandemic: A First Look at Congregation Response" released in early November 2021, the *Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregation*s (EPIC) project run by the Hartford Institute on Religion Research, provided an overview of data exploring many church's reflections on the impact of the pandemic on their congregations. Drawing on survey research conducted between June and August 2021 their work touches several themes that have resonance with the findings of this research project related to churches' responses to technology. One of their notable findings is that 80% of churches surveyed are still engaging in some form of hybrid worship services or other programming, with only 15% of churches meeting fully in-person and a mere 5% meeting only online. Interestingly, the churches that remained hybrid were more likely to have younger staff, be more willing to change, and be larger churches. Additionally, churches meeting exclusively in-person have experienced the greatest decline in church attendance, which are often the smallest in membership and had the most difficulty transitioning to an online context. The churches who were utilizing hybrid ministries (both offline and online options) experienced the most growth. Most churches reported discontinuing fellowship or relational events in the wake of the pandemic. Finally, 66% of church leaders reported that this was the hardest year of ministry that they have ever had. However, 75% said that they never doubted their calling to serve the church.

Consistent with our findings, many churches indicated their intent is to maintain hybrid forms of gathering for the time being. In our study we note a strong division between churches who felt that the internet was a resource providing opportunities to address unique ministry issues during the pandemic period, and others who felt the internet should be viewed as something to be integrated more fully into church ministry and that should last long past the pandemic. Our study found approximately 1/3 of leaders in the Connect Through Tech grant sessions viewed digital opportunities primarily as a pandemic response, and 2/3 of respondents spoke of it as a new resource with long-term possibilities. Thus, these findings from both studies echo one another, which is not surprising as we still exist in a period where the pandemic remains a threat that needs to be addressed by churches. It will be important to track as time goes on whether this emphasis on hybrid worship will stay steady or decrease, especially once the pandemic has subsided.

It is also not surprising that churches who report having more financial resources (and are younger, and larger in size) were more willing to transition into hybrid ministry forms more quickly, and thus experienced notable growth in terms of attendance and outreach. Data from our study similarly found that churches who had either pre-existing digital platforms set up or staff with technological experience prior to the pandemic were able to adapt more quickly and/or more efficiently to setting up online service options than those who did not have internet-integration or social media connections previously established. Additionally, our study found that church leaders and staff that expressed a greater willingness to be flexible or had less apprehension in trying new things also reported greater successes in moving their congregations online in a timely manner. Also, churches willing to recruit younger individuals, who are not typically called upon for central or prominent leadership roles, as volunteers to assist in service leading and digital production, seemed to have greater success or an easier transition to online platforms than others dependent only upon the pastor or senior staff for technology integration. Also, churches with younger staff articulated more ease in this transition to online and/or hybrid worship necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Finally, in comparing our findings to those of the "Navigating the Pandemic" report, we found similar reports of pastors being worn out, bogged down, and emotionally exhausted due to the levels of change and flexibility demanded by shifts in ministry occurring during the pandemic. Pastors explained that they felt overworked most days, often felt overwhelmed on Sundays, and reported a lack of any substantial break over the past 18 months. Yet we also found that leaders remained dedicated and resilient in the face of change. Most of them prefaced or concluded their reports of the high demands on their time with a sense of certainty that even though times were hard and demanding, they still felt called to this work and passionate about or at least committed to their duties. None of the pastors or senior church staff who took part in the Tech Talks mentioned wanting to leave the ministry, but we did find most reported longing for a break and feeling weary. This suggests that pastors know that while this has been an especially challenging time for church work, most pastors in our study saw their work as important, which helped them maintain a sense of focus in their pandemic ministry and a sense of their calling in serving their church and congregation even during times of exhaustion and frustration.

Summary of Report

Overall, the Connect Through Tech talks greatly contribute to this research. Most noticeably, these talks give a voice to the small, rural, and often-neglected congregations that do not receive as much airtime as other churches with more prominent leadership or established networks. These Tech Talk sessions prevent research from ignoring these churches and allow for powerful stories of the creativity, exhaustion, and resilience of leadership. This research aids the overall study of Tech in Churches during COVID-19 by giving practical anecdotal examples of the realities of what is happening within church settings. By answering specific questions, we can see clear themes emerging from church leaders regarding how they responded to the COVID-19 pandemic as small congregations with little to no resources.

Because of this research, we now have a clear understanding and coherent view of what small churches experienced during the pandemic in the past year and a half. We now understand the people who are making the difficult decisions regarding technology, social media, and digital tools. We have a grasp of the level of innovation that catapulted individuals into the online world and the exhaustion that accompanied it. We realize the gravity of the situation as vulnerable populations such as the elderly were desperately trying to remain in a church. Pastors, church leaders, staff, and volunteers worked diligently to keep them connected, however they could. From calling them, Zooming them, buying them computers or tablets, or just teaching them how to set up Wi-Fi, church leadership made it clear that the senior population of vulnerable members would not be forgotten.

Through this we can see the pushback that many people making digital decisions experienced. This ranged from the congregation being hesitant, to church leadership voicing concern. People were not confronting just digital difficulties, but also experiencing the reality of being a part of technologically resistant communities. Despite this, leaders pushed through to ensure the worship service was online and people had access to it.

Identifying and analyzing themes from the Tech Talks, we now see themes emerging regarding successful ideas and the benefits of moving online. Pastor after pastor expressed shock, surprise, and relief that people *actually* watched services. However, more shockingly, even more people watched than could fit in many of these church buildings. Coming in we knew, but we now have even more evidence of, the power of digital media in maintaining church communities in a time of lockdown.

These Tech Talks also aid the research by showing the real-life implications of the work of grants, technology, and online church. Many questions are posed in a shift online: theological, logistical, and practical. We now have an idea of what types of questions pastors, leaders, and members ask when they are forced into an online sphere to worship. We also see the implications for what it means for the future.

Through this research, we see clear evidence of the benefits but also the necessity of the online world and digital technology. For many pastors and leaders, the grants literally saved their churches. Without the money to buy microphones, cameras, and Wi-Fi equipment, churches would have had to shut their doors and their services. This would have had an incredible impact on communities as their source of community and connection would have been removed in a time when community and connection were inarguably essential. The grant money provided the invaluable opportunity for churches to continue and to serve their local congregants, and as an added benefit, to serve even more people.