# Report 3: "'We're Still Here': Reflections of the Post-Pandemic Digital Church"

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

TECH
IN CHURCHES
DURING COVID-19

# "'We're Still Here': Reflections of the Post-Pandemic Digital Church"

Report 3 from the *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 that technology has played in churches during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, it studies how digital media use shaped the worship, outreach, and outlook of congregations during this time. The study draws on data collected in conjunction with the Center for Congregations' Connect Through Tech grant program between 2020-2021 and follow-up research related to this program collected from 2022-2023. 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. 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.

In this third report, we focus on investigating and understanding the post-COVID experiences of church leaders and congregations. To determine how congregations' views of technology and online worship changed over time, a survey was conducted. The central aim of this survey was to establish to what extent and in which specific ways churches' engagement and experimentation with digital media and technologies over the pandemic had altered their view of community and ministry. We were particularly interested in the changes that churches made in their overall activities, perspectives, and functioning from a pre-COVID to a world of post-COVID. Many churches had to decide which technologies to utilize, how social media would fit the needs of their congregations, and who could run the digital resources during the service.

Now that we have entered a largely post-COVID-19 era, churches are now dealing with the long-lasting effects, changes, and challenges created by the technological innovation implemented during a period when "digital church" was often the only option open to churches committed to maintaining services over the pandemic. Report three focused

on exploring the effects of the online transition for churches, both temporary and permanent. We specifically were interested in a few dynamics. First, we wanted to explore if there were differences in technology use before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. We expected that there were, so we were interested in what these changes were exactly. Second, we wanted to explore attitude changes pre- and post-pandemic. We were specifically interested if there was a shift in the apprehension of technology before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Thirdly, and related to the first two questions, we wanted to explore if there were differences in responses based on the sizes of the churches. Lastly, we were interested in whether there were differences in responses based on the ages of those who implemented the changes and technologies. Below, we will discuss these questions in depth.

**Context of Report 3 and Overview of Research**

This report follows Report 2, "Mission to Serve Tech: Churches 'Lock Down' Technology During the Global Pandemic," which offered a detailed content analysis of churches' responses to how they used funds provided by the Connecting through Technology (CTT) grant and the impact of the technology used on their church experiences during the pandemic (https://hdl.handle.net/1969.1/197075). In Report 3, we conducted a follow-up survey to better understand how conditions related to the pandemic, post-COVID, have influenced churches' engagement with and attitudes toward technology. This survey was sent to all churches who submitted final reports for the CTT grant program (2700), and the survey was completed by 246 church pastors or leaders.

The survey included questions surrounding demographic characteristics as well as approximately 40 questions focusing on technological decisions that were made pre-pandemic, during the pandemic, and post-pandemic. Out of the 246 church leaders who responded, the vast majority identified themselves as paid full-time staff (60%) and the rest as either regular volunteers (18%) or part-time staff (14%). The individual responding varied from the age 24 to 78, with an average age of 52. The majority of the respondents were in small towns, the largest makeup was in Indianapolis (35 churches) or Fort Wayne (14 churches). The majority of the respondents identified themselves as White (82%), followed by Black (14%), Hispanic (2%), or Asian (.4%).

Most of the survey questions related to attendance, technology, and attitudinal-related questions were separated into pre-, during-, and post-pandemic. Our hope was to gain a better understanding of how, when, and why congregations and staff responded to the pandemic.
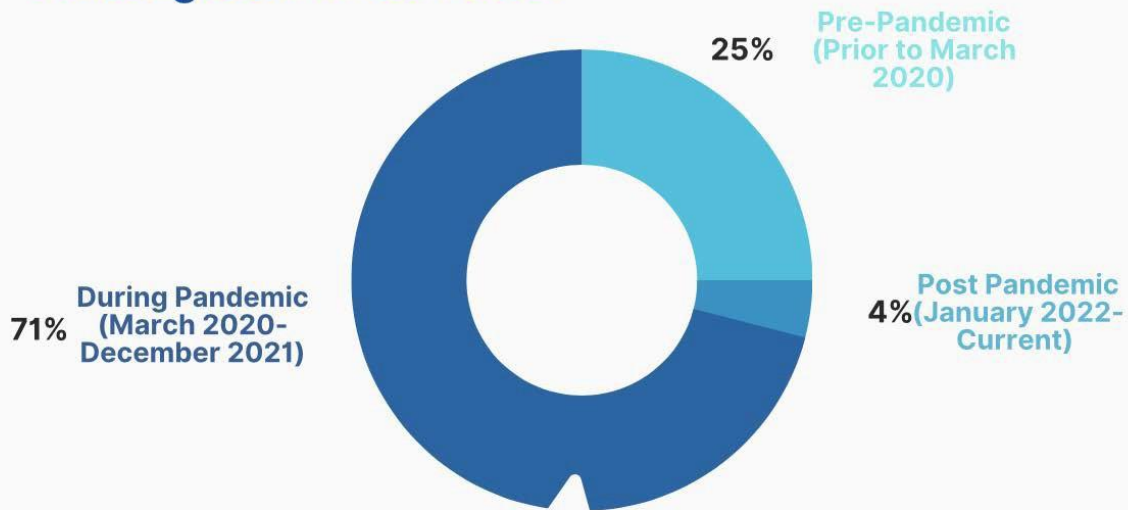
Throughout the scholarship that has been published in the midst of and post-COVID-19, we can see that technology played an integral role in maintaining organizational structures (Abu Talib, Bettayeb, & Omer, 2021). The United States especially has seen the rapid shift to a work-from-home, commonly referred to as the acronym: "WFH," world. People utilize technology, social media, and cameras/microphones to do their jobs, have doctor's appointments, visit with friends, and much more. Unsurprisingly, the technology needs and uses shifted as the demands did, and that same pattern was seen in our work and in the religious world.

In our survey, we asked the question, "When did you [the church leader or pastor] begin utilizing technology?" Here, we were interested in when technology was implemented in the church setting. Did churches utilize technology before COVID-19? Did they begin implementing technology at the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, or did they wait until a few months into the global lockdown? Is it possible that any church leader waited until post-pandemic to begin implementing technology? These are the patterns we were interested in exploring.

Our data showed that many people felt that the decision was thrust upon them at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. One pastor from Greencastle, Indiana, shared that they began using technology "When COVID made us." This comment reflects what we can see in our data. Most individuals began utilizing technology during the COVID-19 pandemic between March 2020 and December 2021 (71%). A smaller amount began utilizing technology post-pandemic (4%). Some churches (25%) had already begun using some form of digital technology to enhance their service, but most respondents indicated that they "vamped things up" at the start of the pandemic. Here, we can see that 75% of respondents had not utilized technology in their church services before the COVID-19 pandemic.

**When did you begin utilizing tech in services?**

- Pre-Pandemic (Prior to March 2020): 25%
- Post Pandemic (January 2022-Current): 4%
- During Pandemic (March 2020-December 2021): 71%

Admittedly, when asked in our survey, respondents indicated that even their use of technology changed noticeably during the pandemic. Most individuals who responded to our survey indicated that it had changed quite a bit (38%), and others indicated it had changed a lot (36%). One church in Marion, Indiana, shared that they "...still maintain [their] livestream platform using this equipment [that they were able to purchase through the grant]. [They] also have begun creating curriculum for [their] discipleship pathway with it as well. [They] have built on this system to make it better for these uses." Now, instead of just using livestream platforms and digital technology for the Sunday service, they are utilizing their resources to further other ministries in their church. Other survey respondents reported that their use of technology had changed "some" since the emergence of COVID-19 (16%). A smaller percentage indicated it had changed a little (7%) or not at all (3%).

## How much has your use of tech changed since the pandemic?

**7% A little**   **3% Not at all**

**16% Some**

**38% Quite a bit**

**36% A lot**
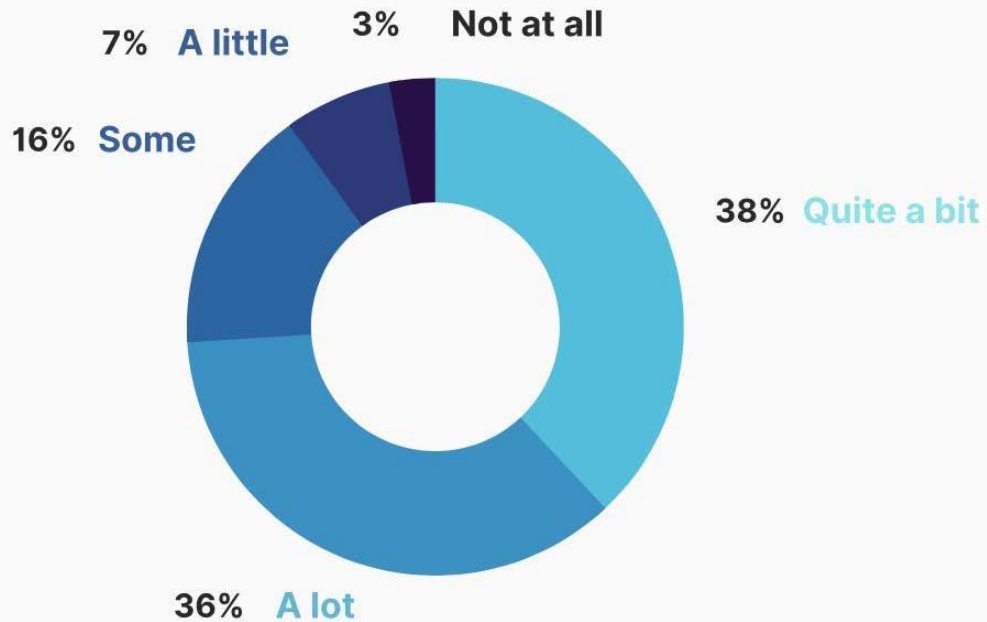
What we can see in our research is that respondents are self-disclosing that the pandemic caused a transition in terms of what technology was being used and how it was being used. For example, for many small churches in rural Indiana, the need for livestreaming was nonexistent. There was no need to expand their reach or allow members to join from home. However, everything shifted when the pandemic forced everyone to stay home. One church in Fort Wayne, Indiana, with a congregation of 75, shared that "Live Streaming is allowing us to reach those we otherwise would not be able to reach." Here, consistent with our data, it is evident that running services for live streaming has been most helpful in reaching members and others interested.

In our data, it is evident that there were major shifts in the use of live streaming. Most churches did not previously use live streaming and began to utilize it during the pandemic. Quickly into the pandemic, many churches realized that live streaming was the only resource allowing them to broadcast their services during a time of restriction. Our results confirm this shift. Pre-pandemic, the majority of respondents indicated that they did not utilize live streaming (45%). The most blatant shift can be seen in that post-

pandemic, the overwhelming majority of respondents indicated that they used livestreaming "a lot" (72%). Our survey asked leaders to reflect on what they were most proud of during the pandemic. One leader in Richmond, Indiana, shared that they were most proud of how "people appreciated the livestreams." From these results, we can see that pre- and post-pandemic, a major shift for congregations was the utilization of live streaming in services.

# LIVESTREAMING
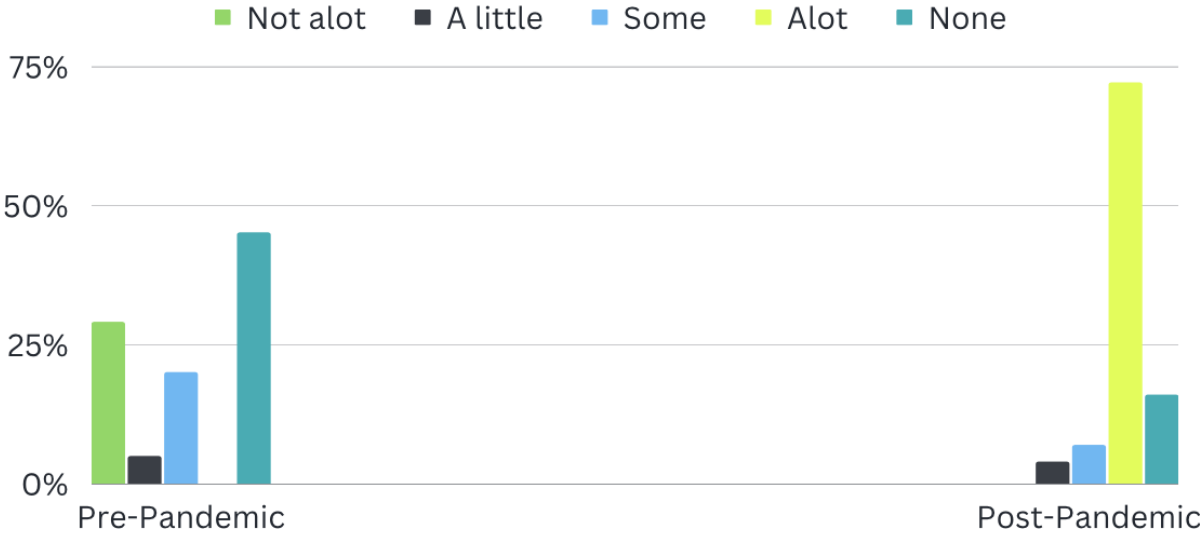


In addition, our survey data offers insights into the primary digital platforms and tools used by churches during the pandemic and how these uses differed before and after the pandemic. An additional finding from our work includes how churches communicated with their church congregants and distributed important church information to them. From our data, Facebook was one resource that experienced a major shift. Facebook became a resource for churches to communicate with members, livestream, and remind the congregation of events and details. One church in Osgood, Indiana, shared that they utilized "recording the service and uploading the video to Facebook." Another church in West Lafayette, Indiana, utilized Facebook for "weekly sermon discussions." Pre-pandemic, the majority of participants indicated that they used the social media website "Some" (54%), and an even smaller number of individuals utilized Facebook "A little" (30%).

So, some churches had already begun using the website, but it was not essential. What we can see is that post-pandemic, some churches realized that it was essential. After the

COVID-19 shift, most churches reported that they used Facebook "A lot" (63%) or "Some" (23%). Facebook, a resource for communication and connection, became an integral way to keep churches alive during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Both from the data and our narratives from church leaders, Facebook was clearly an important resource during COVID-19.
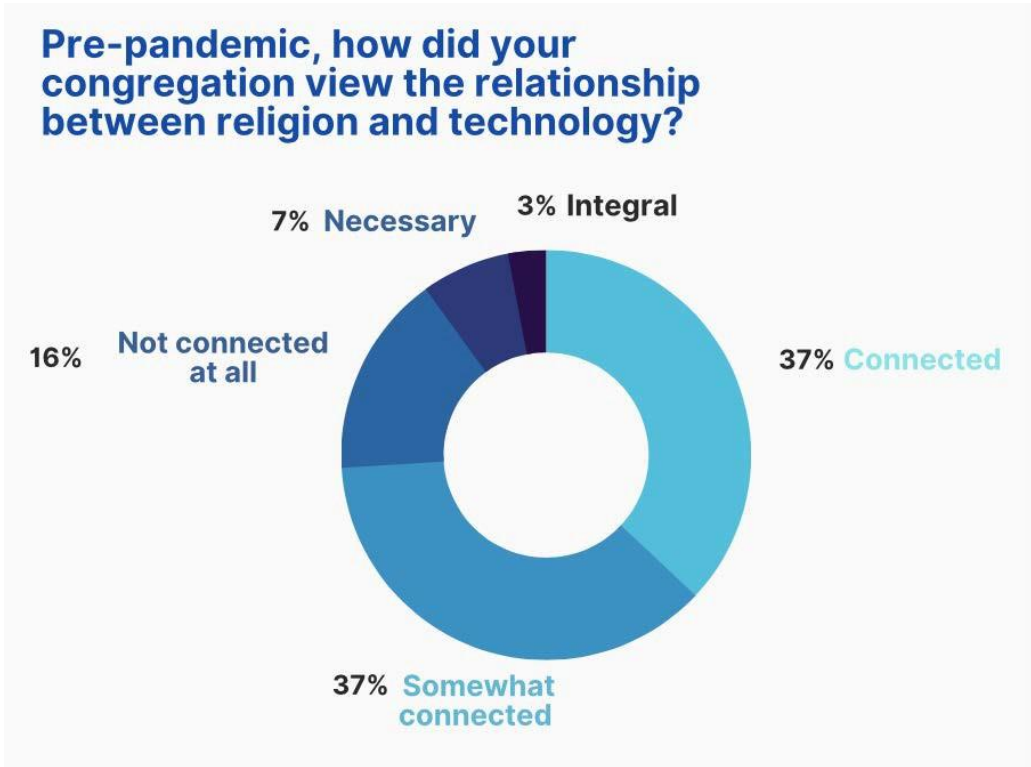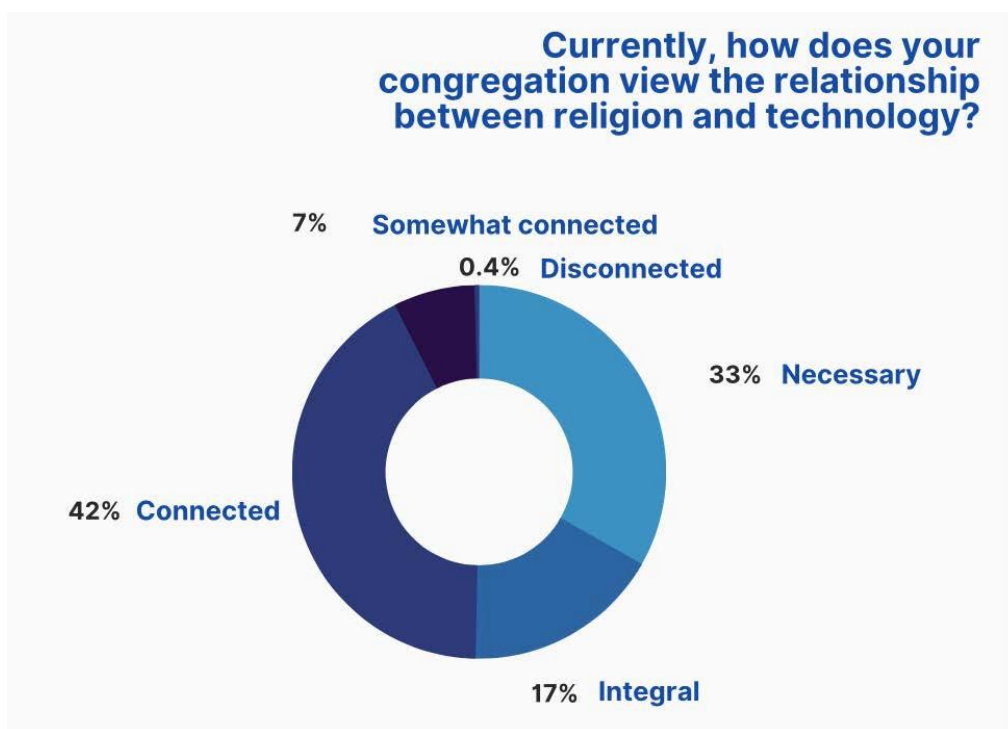
## FACEBOOK
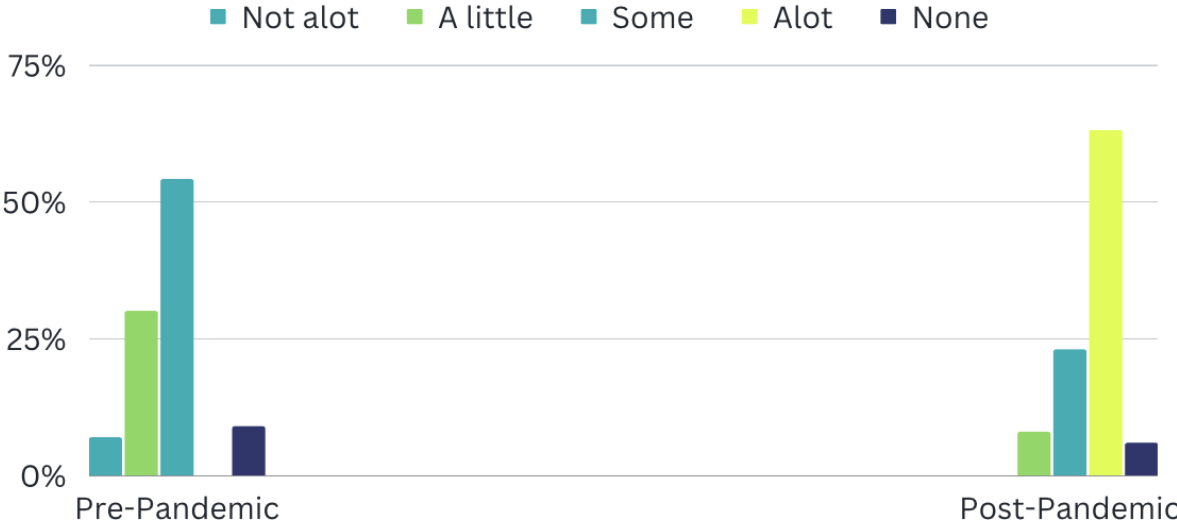
The social conditions created by the COVID-19 pandemic required many changes and adjustments of churches, leaders, congregants, and especially pastors regarding their communication practices and forms of worship. Many of our questions in the report surrounded "pre-COVID," "During," and "Current" perspectives. Here, our intention was to sort out differences in the timing of responses.

One of our main questions regarded how churches viewed the relationship between religion and technology. In our research analysis, 74% of respondents indicated that pre-pandemic, their congregation was in some way connected with digital technology, with a comparable amount indicating they were connected (37%) and or somewhat connected (37%). Interestingly, some participants reported that they felt that before COVID-19, their congregation was not connected with digital technology at all (16%). Smaller amounts of people indicated that before the pandemic, their relationship with digital technology was either necessary (7%) or integral (3%). This fits with many of the narratives that we heard from church leaders who were initially more hesitant towards the idea of technology being an integral part of the church's work.



**Pre-pandemic, how did your congregation view the relationship between religion and technology?**

3% Integral

7% Necessary

16% Not connected at all

37% Connected

37% Somewhat connected

Currently, to compare, a much larger group sees the relationship as necessary (33%) and integral (17%). While the largest portion remains connected (42%). A smaller portion sees it as disconnected (.4%) or somewhat connected (7%). Here, we can see those attitudes towards the relationship of tech and the church have changed over time. One church in Carmel, Indiana, shared this changed positive attitude. They reported, "I don't think the congregation cared about live streaming before the pandemic. Now, they are so thankful that they can still be a part of the worship service and church family even when they can't attend, are away from home for short periods, or even relocated." Again, we can see both quantitatively and qualitatively that churches experienced a shift in attitude of their view of the relationship between tech and the church.



**Currently, how does your congregation view the relationship between religion and technology?**

- 7% Somewhat connected
- 0.4% Disconnected
- 33% Necessary
- 17% Integral
- 42% Connected

Why is this important? What does this tell us? This finding indicates that the pandemic did alter respondents' perspectives on the relationship between digital technology and the Church. Before the pandemic, far more individuals found the relationship to be not connected or somewhat connected, while after the pandemic, many respondents found it connected and even necessary. The COVID-19 crisis for churches evidently created a crisis for churches, not only in the restrictions that were enforced but also in making decisions about how their congregations would stay alive. This information suggests that for churches, the use of tech might have altered their understanding of the relationship it can offer churches.

**Pre-pandemic, how did your congregation view the relationship between religion and technology?**

- 3% Integral
- 7% Necessary
- 16% Not connected at all
- 37% Connected
- 37% Somewhat connected

**Currently, how does your congregation view the relationship between religion and technology?**

- 7% Somewhat connected
- 0.4% Disconnected
- 33% Necessary
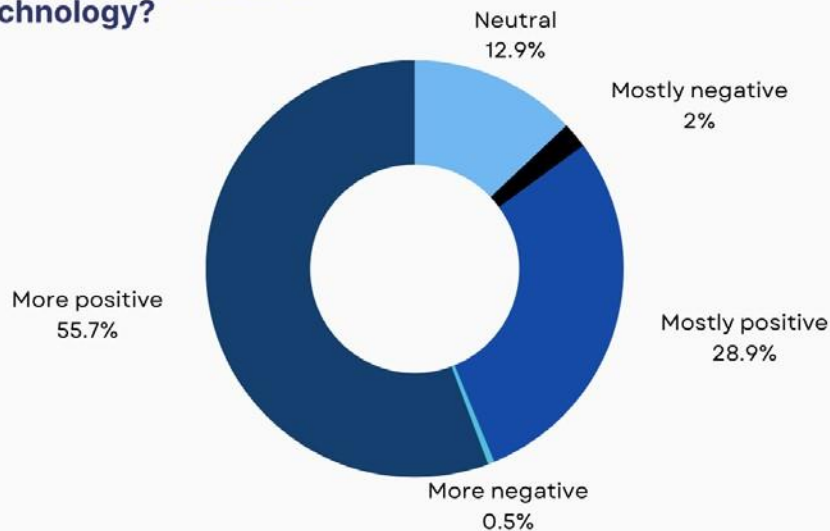- 42% Connected
- 17% Integral
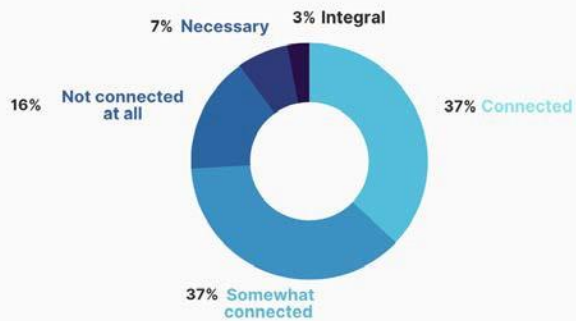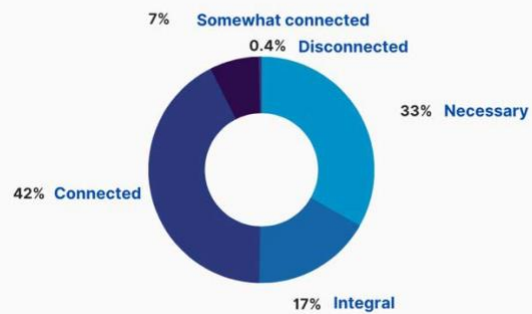
We asked participants to consider what the overall view of technology was within their church. They could rate that their church views digital technology as either:

- **Mostly negative**
- **Bad, more negative than positive**
- **Average, equally negative, and positive**
- **Good, more positive than negative**
- **Great, mostly positive**

Our results indicate that most church congregants see digital technology as good, often more positive than negative (56%). A smaller but significant number of respondents see the relationship as great, mostly positive more than negative (29%). Fewer respondents see the relationship as average, equally negative, and positive (13%). Lastly, very few respondents believe that digital technology is more negative than positive (2%) or mostly negative (0.5%). What this tells us is that most congregations see their relationship with technology as positive, which is consistent with many of our narratives. For example, one church in Kokomo, Indiana, shared, "We had a pastoral change in January, just before the pandemic hit. The congregation stuck through the tough time of being closed. They rallied around the online services, and as soon as possible, small groups began to meet while social distancing and being masked. Everyone worked together to just make it work." What we can see is that regardless of personal preference, many church congregants saw the helpfulness and resources in technology and accepted it.

**How would you rate your congregation's view of technology?**

- Neutral 12.9%
- Mostly negative 2%
- Mostly positive 28.9%
- More negative 0.5%
- More positive 55.7%

Finally, we were interested in how many respondents and church leaders agreed with the statement, "The pandemic has changed how I view the relationship between digital technology and religious congregations." Their options for responses were:

- Did not alter the relationship
- Changed in some ways, but mostly did not alter
- Changed the relationship in most ways
- Completely changed how I view the relationship

Our results indicate that surprisingly, many church leaders see the relationship changing in some ways, but mostly not altering how they view digital technology's relationship with religion (38%). A close number of respondents indicated that it did change the relationship in most ways (36%). Some church leaders indicate that the pandemic completely changed how they view this relationship (21%). Finally, the smallest percentage of people indicate that the pandemic did not alter their understanding of the relationship between technology and the Church (5%).

**Did the pandemic alter how you view the relationship between digital technology and religious congregations?**

Did not
5%

Changed completely
21%

Mostly not
38%

Changed in most ways
36%
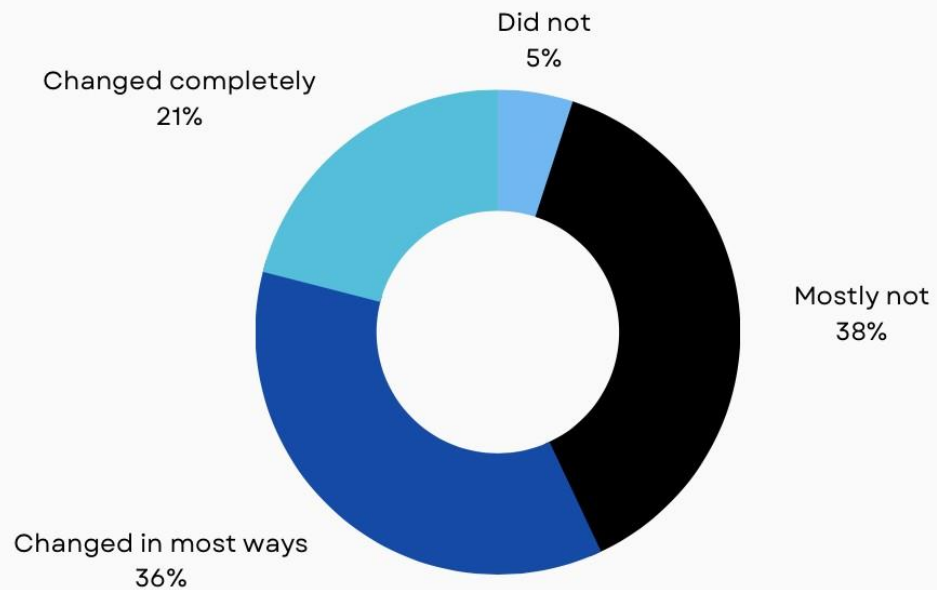
The next comparison that we were interested in for this Report was whether the responses to three key questions were different for churches that started out (pre-pandemic) with different-sized churches. We were interested in these three questions:

1) **When did you begin implementing technology in your church services?**
2) **Pre-pandemic, what was the relationship between the congregation and technology?**
3) **Post-pandemic, what was the relationship between the congregation and technology?**

To explore this, we separated the churches by groupings. We looked at churches that pre-pandemic had an average estimated in-person attendance of:

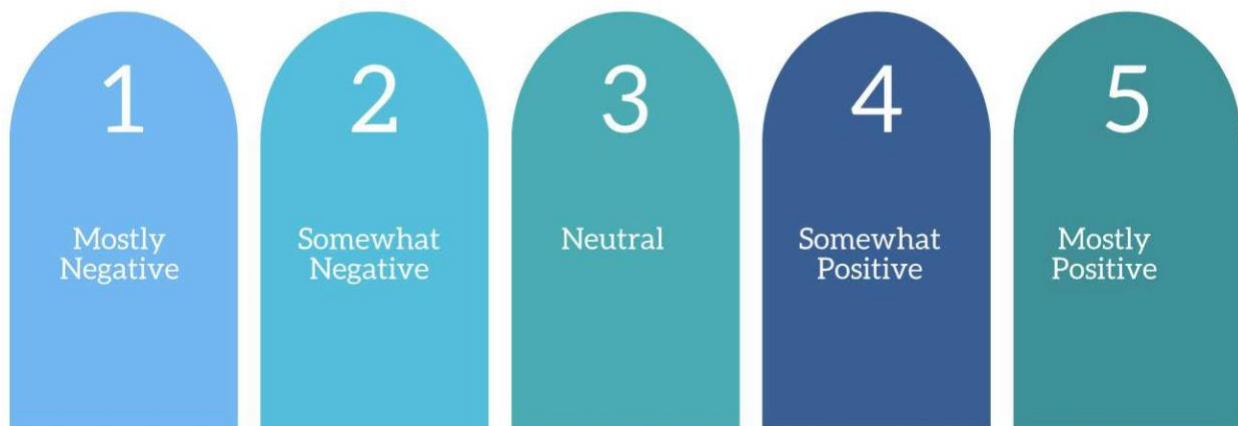- **0-99**
- **100-199**
- **200-499**
- **500+**

We wanted to explore these differences because we hypothesized differences as larger churches, because of the size of their volunteer base or income, may have already begun the process of transitioning to digital resources. This might have changed the relational dynamics between the congregation and the church before the COVID-19 pandemic. The majority of respondents reported having churches that pre-COVID averaged 0–99 congregants (51.7%). The next largest group of respondents reported having churches with 100–199 members or congregants (22.9%). Following that, we had 18.2% of respondents identify their church as falling into the 200–499-member category. Finally, our smallest group identified their church as having 500+ congregants (7.2%). What we can see through this is that the majority of respondents pastored or led small churches with fewer than 100 church congregants. This is consistent with the average church size nationally.

**Breakdown of Pre-Pandemic Church Congregation Sizes**

500+
7.2%

200-499
18.2%

0-99
51.7%

100-199
22.9%
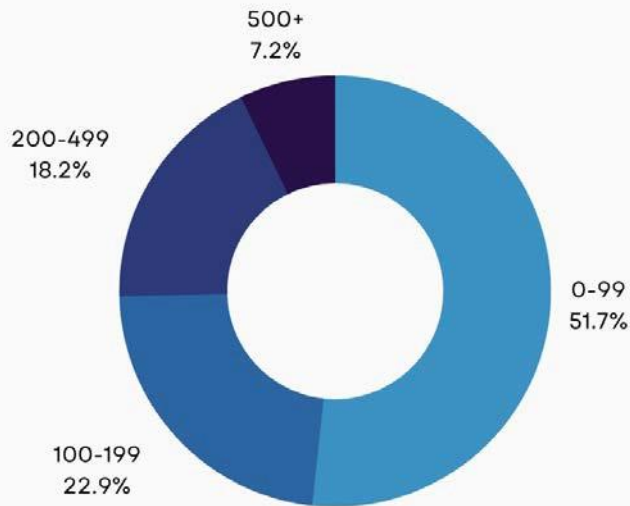
Next, we were interested in the pre-pandemic responses regarding the relationship between Church and digital technology. The lower numbers on the scale (1-2) represent more negative responses to the relationship. The middle number (3) represents a neutral stance. Higher numbers on the scale represent more positive perspectives on the relationship (4-5).
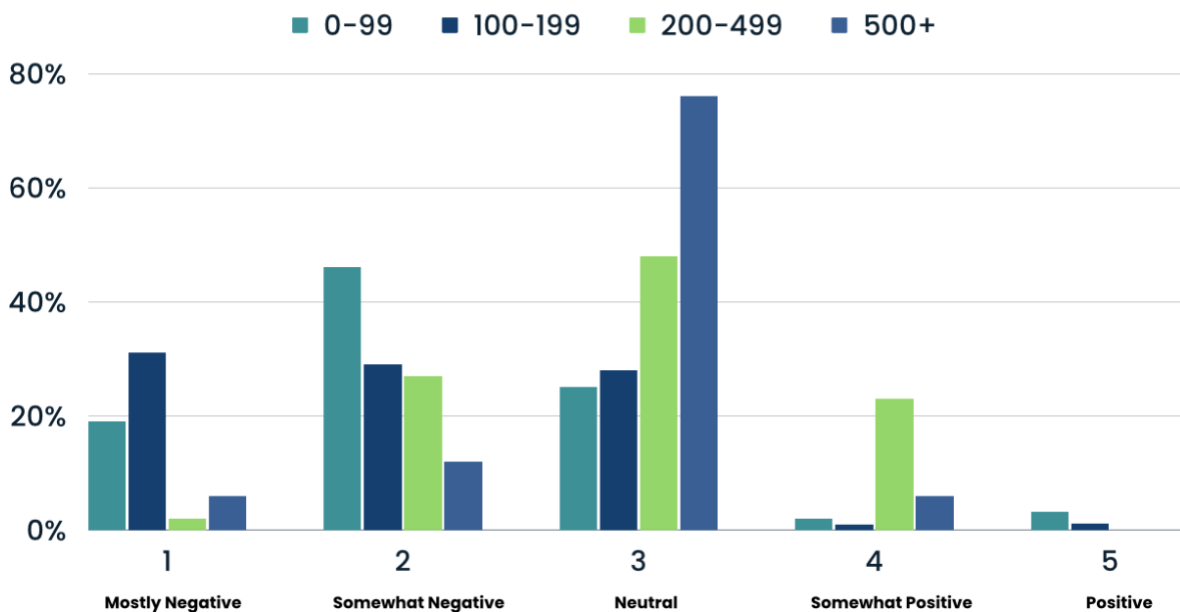
**Response Rating for the Question: "How do you view the relationship between the Church and technology?"**

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mostly Negative | Somewhat Negative | Neutral | Somewhat Positive | Mostly Positive |

We separated the responses by category of church size. What we can see is that there were changes across pre-pandemic perspectives. For the most part, pre-pandemic
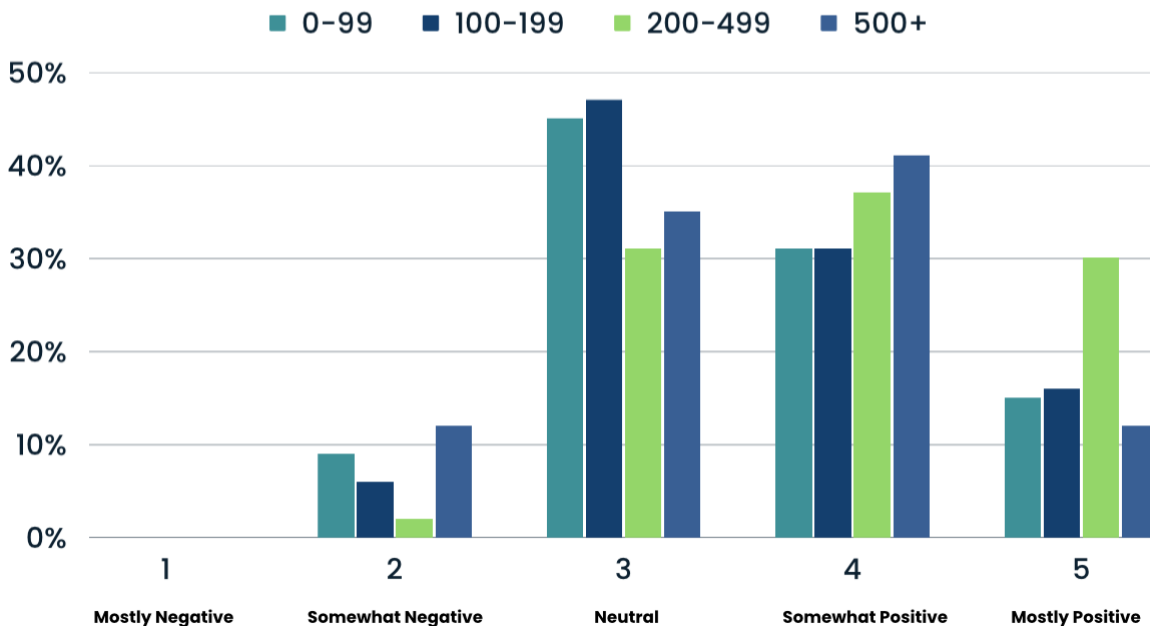
churches did not have largely positive perspectives on the relationship. Only 1-3% of churches ranked the relationship as the most positive (5). Only 1-6% of churches ranked the relationship as somewhat positive (4), with the exclusion of churches that had 200-499 members; a larger percentage of that group did see the relationship pre-pandemic as somewhat positive (23%). What we can see here is that larger churches seemed to identify more neutral responses to the pre-pandemic relationship. The intuitive and likely reasoning is that larger churches had already begun implementing some technology before the shift online of the pandemic.

## PRE-PANDEMIC PERCEIVED RELATIONSHIP TO TECHNOLOGY

Legend: ■ 0-99  ■ 100-199  ■ 200-499  ■ 500+

| Rating | Label |
| --- | --- |
| 1 | Mostly Negative |
| 2 | Somewhat Negative |
| 3 | Neutral |
| 4 | Somewhat Positive |
| 5 | Positive |

Next, we were interested in the current perspectives on the relationship between church and technology. What we can see obviously is that post-COVID-19, there was a major shift from more negative responses to the relationship to more neutral or positive responses. No response, regardless of church size, indicated an entirely negative perspective on the relationship between tech and church (0%). A small percentage of all groups report some negative perspectives (2-12%). The largest percentage of responses indicate overtly neutral responses of the two (31-45%). Most responses report it is somewhere in the positive range (4-5).

# POST-PANDEMIC PERCEIVED RELATIONSHIP TO TECHNOLOGY

**Legend:** ■ 0-99   ■ 100-199   ■ 200-499   ■ 500+

| | 1 Mostly Negative | 2 Somewhat Negative | 3 Neutral | 4 Somewhat Positive | 5 Mostly Positive |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 0-99 | 0% | 9% | 45% | 31% | 15% |
| 100-199 | 0% | 6% | 47% | 31% | 16% |
| 200-499 | 0% | 2% | 31% | 37% | 30% |
| 500+ | 0% | 12% | 35% | 41% | 12% |

As can be seen below, placing the two results from pre- and post-pandemic perceptions on the relationship between the Church and technology allows us a better look into this juxtaposition. Immediately, it can be noted that the pre-pandemic results tended to be more on the negative to neutral responses from all of the sized churches. Post-pandemic, it can be noted that there is a major shift to the right side, more towards neutral to positive perceived relationships. Most notably, not a single respondent, regardless of the size of their church, responded with the most negative view of the relationship post-pandemic. This is important as it sheds light on the changes from churches' perceptions pre- and post-pandemic. The forced transition to technology and

the use of it clearly had an impact on the perceived relationship between the Church and technology for churches.

Lastly, we were interested in if there was a difference in *when* technology integration began depending on the size of the church. What we found is that most of the groups began utilizing technology pre- or early-pandemic. The larger churches implemented pre-pandemic technology significantly more than the smaller churches. For example, 50% of churches with congregations between 200-449 people and 59% of churches with congregations greater than 500 implemented technology prior to the pandemic. In



PRE-PANDEMIC PERCEIVED RELATIONSHIP TO TECHNOLOGY



POST-PANDEMIC PERCEIVED RELATIONSHIP TO TECHNOLOGY
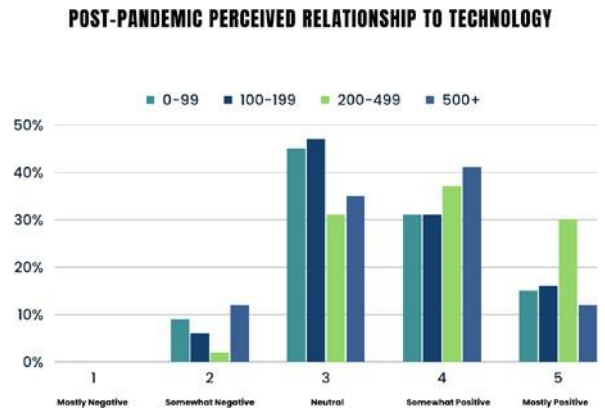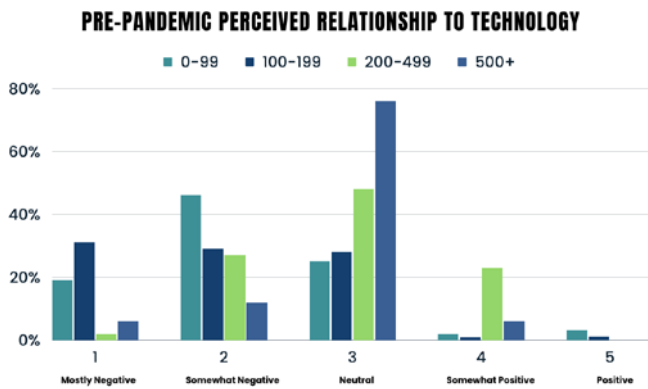
contrast, only 22% of churches with less than 99 people and 31% of churches with 100-199 members implemented technology before the pandemic. From our data, we can see that more of the smaller churches (between 0 to 199 people) needed to shift at the initial stages of the pandemic (63%) compared to the larger churches (over 200 people) in which only 41-43% made this shift in this time frame. As can be seen in the graph below, larger churches had more digital technology resources pre-pandemic.

## WHEN DID YOUR CONGREGATION BEGIN INTEGRATING AND USING DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY FOR RELIGIOUS SERVICES?

■ 0-99  ■ 100-199  ■ 200-499  ■ 500+
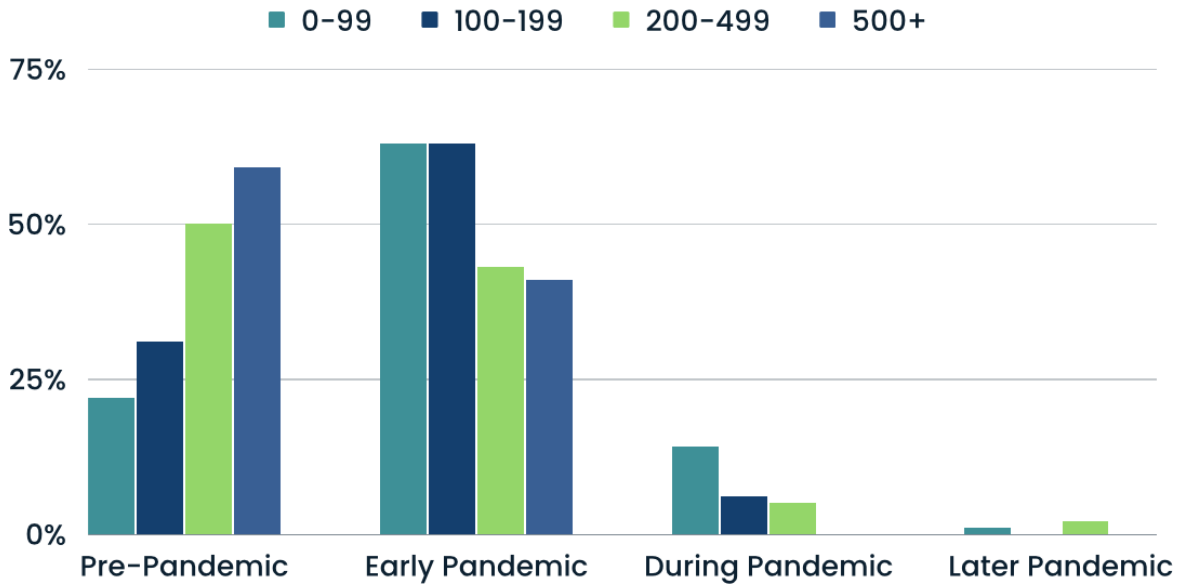
**Age is Not Just a Number:**
**The Age of the Person Implementing Change Impacted Which Social Media They Utilized**

The next question that this report was interested in exploring was whether the ages of the individuals in charge of making technological decisions in churches impacted the type of choices they made. To do this, we separated the churches into three age categories:

1) **20s-30s**
2) **40s-50s**
3) **60s-70s**

These three groups represent distinct differences among themselves. After we separated the data into the three categories, we then explored the questions related to technological choices (i.e., Twitter, Facebook, live streaming, etc.).

**Breakdown of Church Leaders' Ages**

- 20s-30s: 15.7%
- 40s-50s: 53.8%
- 60s-70s: 30.5%
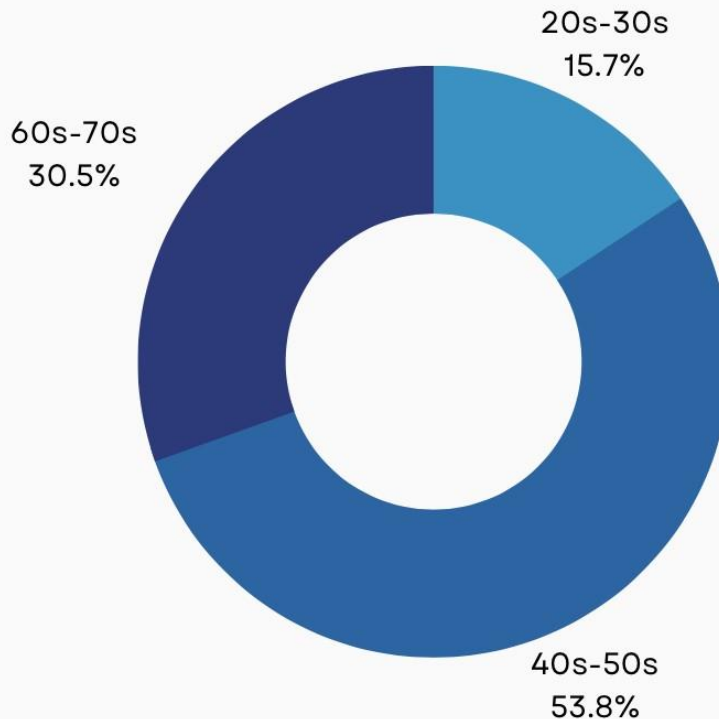
Individuals in their 20s-30s represent people who likely fall into the "millennial" generation. This group has been more engaged with the internet explosion as they grew up with more technology than any previous generation.

The second group, those that fall in their 40s-50s, are a part of the "Gen X" generation. Their generation is distinct in that they grew up with some cameras/microphones, but they did make the shift to cell phones and instant messaging. This generation had a much starker technological shift than their children, who were immersed in tech from the very beginning of their lives.

Lastly, our final category, individuals in their 60s-70s, fall into the "Baby Boomer" generation. This group comprises those born directly after the Second World War and were not as much a part of the technological shift of the 1990s. This group had to make

the greatest technological shift. They grew up without much of the technology and digital resources that exist now. One church admitted: "I would say that BECAUSE of the pandemic, the older generations who would have been slower and less interested in trying to learn about technological updates to our church ministry offerings, have been MUCH more motivated and willing to learn and participate in everything from watching online, to giving online."

Our results indicated a few interesting key findings. Across all three age groups, using a website seems to be a commonality. Individuals from their 20s to their 70s indicated that they use a website "a lot," "some," or "a little," with only 9-16% of each group not using a website at all. That indicates that websites serve as a common resource for churches, regardless of age group, to communicate, engage with, and serve their congregation. Similarly, our results found that groups use Wi-Fi, video productions, online giving, newsletters, and online archives similarly across all groups.

# WEBSITE
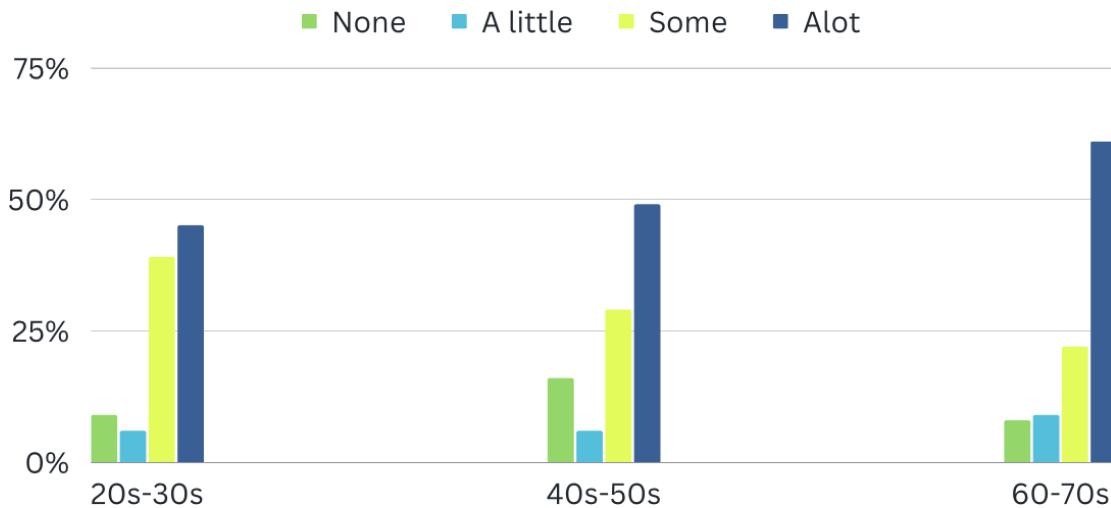


Interestingly, Facebook is used most by the age group of individuals in their 60s-70s, with 83% indicating that they use it "a lot." In contrast, 57% of individuals in their 40s-50s and 58% of those in their 20-30s use Facebook "a lot." This fits with the narrative that we often hear of younger generations having a declining interest in Facebook while many older generations and the elderly remain engaged and active on Facebook.

# FACEBOOK

Legend: ■ None  ■ A little  ■ Some  ■ Alot
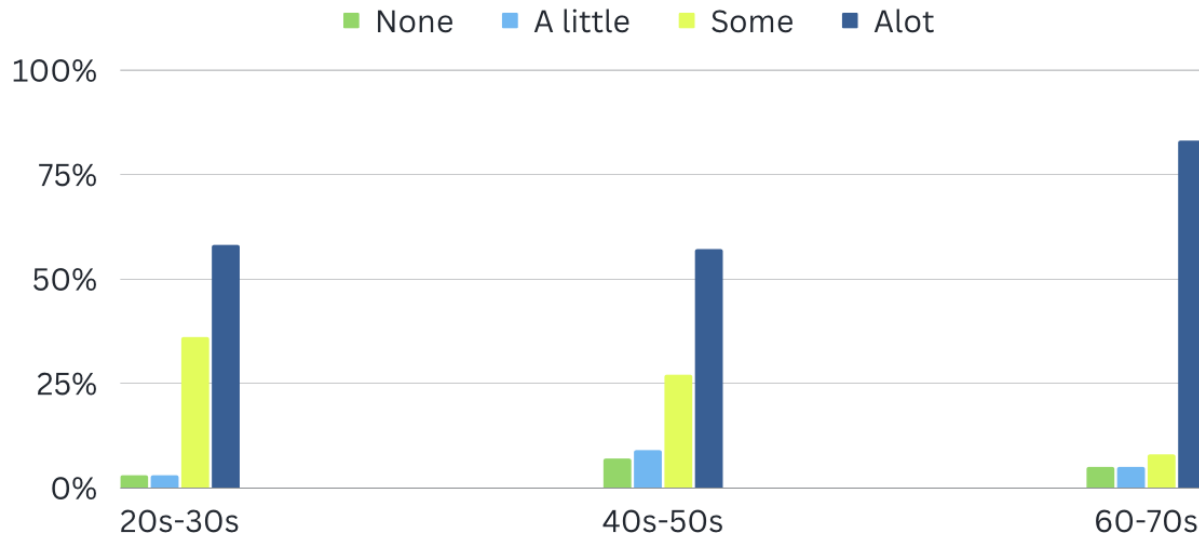


Our findings also indicate that Instagram is used more commonly by younger respondents than by older respondents. The majority of those in the 60s-70s category reported that they do not use Instagram (70%), whereas the number of reported respondents that do not use Instagram declined in both the 40s-50s category (48%) and 20s-30s category (36%).

# INSTAGRAM
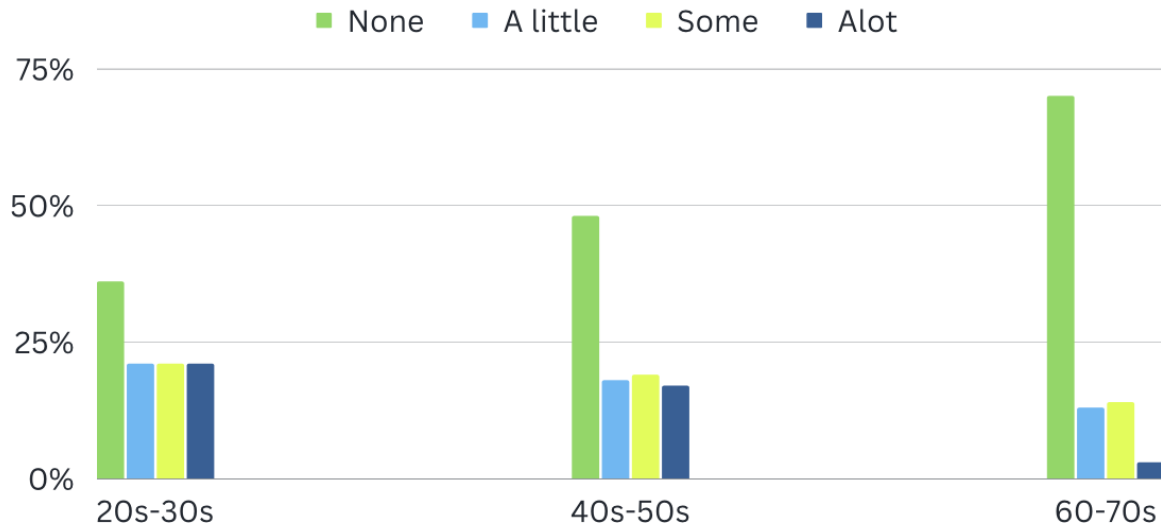


There is a similar trend with Twitter among respondents. While most respondents did not utilize Twitter for the purposes of the church (61%-80%), the younger the audience, the more this number increased. Why is this relevant? This confirms our intuition with data that the ages of those in charge does have an impact on the type of technology chosen. Younger generations were more apt to utilize Instagram and Twitter, two social media sites that are newer and more traditionally considered "young."

# Summary of Report 3 Findings

**Overall, churches made major moves towards integrating technology into their work and ministry during the pandemic. These transitions included adding the number of new digital technologies, as well as deciding which social media sites to utilize.** Amid digital restrictions and social distancing guidelines, our data indicates that Indiana churches also encountered many technological questions and decisions. From our data, we can see that churches reported that their engagement with digital technology changed quite a bit since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Technology not only changed during the pandemic for churches in Indiana but also church attitudes.** Our data from the responses of Indiana churches indicate that while they were actively shifting their use of technology as a necessity, many of them report that their attitudes toward technology and their perspective of the relationship between church and technology has changed as well. There was a shift towards more neutral and positive responses by the end of the pandemic. Specifically, the results indicate that those who started with more negative attitudes toward technology changed to more neutral attitudes whereas those who started out with more neutral attitudes toward technology changed to more positive attitudes.

**COVID-19 forced churches to widen the scope of the types and diversity of social media they used digital technology.** Churches not only began live streaming or utilizing online giving during the pandemic, many churches report beginning to utilize social media sites far more during the pandemic in an effort to stay connected to their church congregants. Most notably, Facebook was a popular social media site to utilize for connection and communication with congregants.

**Attitudes towards the relationship between technology and the Church varied by the size of the church.**
When the churches in our data were separated by size, our results indicated that pre-pandemic, larger churches tended to have more neutral perspectives on the relationship between church and technology, whereas smaller churches tended to have more negative responses to the relationship. Our data shows there is a correlation between church size and attitudes towards technology. This suggests the need to further explore the potential connection between church size and access to technology and how this shapes church views of technology.

**When churches integrated technology into their work, it was clearly based on the sizes of the Indiana churches.** Our data shows that many larger churches had already begun implementing digital resources pre-pandemic, whereas smaller churches had to make a more drastic transition online in March of 2020. This indicates that larger churches were more likely to have already been using some level of technology in their services before the pandemic forced them to.

This seems to suggest that technology development and usage might depend on resources. Almost all churches that had resources that allowed the usage of technology before the pandemic already had an established online presence. The smaller churches that didn't have the resources were hesitant to start employing technology even after the pandemic, likely because their resources were already spread thin. This is an important theme for further study.

**The age of the church leader making digital decisions impacted the *type* of social media chosen.** While some uses, such as livestream, remain similar among the age groups of churches, there are some differences. We found that older church leaders (especially pastors over 60) tended to use Facebook more than younger leaders. Younger Leaders (those under 40) utilized Twitter or Instagram much more often. This suggests that church choices about technology are directly tied to generational social media preference.

# From "We're Still Here!" to "Back to Normal: *Considering Similarities and Differences in How Churches are Negotiating Technology in a Post-Pandemic Reality*

Our research findings echo many of the overarching themes explored in the August 2023 report put out by the Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations (EPIC) research project. In "Back to Normal? The Mixed Messages of Congregational Recovery Coming Out of the Pandemic," the project reflects on data from their fourth survey (see: https://www.covidreligionresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Epic-4-2.pdf, conducted in January to March 2023, about how churches have responded to post-COVID challenges. When focusing on EPIC's findings related to congregational technology use and beliefs, we see a number of notable similarities and differences.

Firstly, the similarities between both of these research studies revealed that Facebook was one of the most heavily utilized social and streaming services. The EPIC study found that 53% of their respondents used a social platform like Facebook Live to stream their services. This echoes the findings in our study on page seven of this study, in which the largest shift can be seen between the majority of church congregations using Facebook shifted from being "a little" before the pandemic to "a lot" after the pandemic.

Another similarity can be seen in the optimism within many congregations when facing their post-pandemic era. The EPIC study detailed that conflict levels within congregations were decreasing. This leveling out of conflict can also be seen on the graphs on page sixteen of this report, in which the post-pandemic relationship to technology shows that no churches described this relationship as "mostly negative." That being said, Churches are not out of the woods yet. Both EPIC and the NMRDC found an aging church leadership and population, reflected on the graph on page eighteen, in which only 15.7% of church leaders were under 30 years of age. However, the differences between the studies can be seen in the outlook. The EPIC study classifies this older population as being resistant to change. Our data shows that given the resources and a positive attitude, innovation can happen in any church and at any age. Specifically, this is supported when looking at the summary on page nineteen. When looking across the three age groups, websites serve as a common resource for churches, regardless of age, to communicate, engage with, and serve congregations. Our report found that age does not need to be a stumbling block.

It is clear across both reports that normalcy has not been reached and that churches are not yet in a place of stasis. EPIC found that many church leaders are fighting fatigue and are exhausted and disillusioned. This has resulted in what they determined to be a downward sloping of leaders' and congregations' willingness to continue to change to adapt to new challenges. This contrasts with the many churches included in our study that have continued to go above and beyond when integrating tech in a post-pandemic world. As seen in the quote on page six, one church in Marion, Indiana, shared that they "...still maintain [their] livestream platform using this equipment [that they were able to purchase through the grant]. [They] also have begun creating curriculum for [their] discipleship pathway with it as well. [They] have built on this system to make it better for these uses." Although this mirrors past reports published by the Tech In Churches research project, in Report Three we found that the presence of "change fatigue" and feelings of burnout amongst many pastors and members does not mean innovation and creative technology implementation cannot or is not happening. What is needed are members and staff who are willing to create conditions that facilitate and encourage innovation. Without support and help from a team that is working towards innovation and new ideas, leaders will easily fall into the burnout they have been fighting during these tumultuous times. Churches that have a team and support are the ones that are excelling at hybrid structures and using the expertise and the new resources they gained in ways they had not previously imagined. Support is paramount as churches continue to innovate and try to find new normalcy.

## References

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