



**Tech Trend Paper 5**  
**Churches Still Need Help: A Reflection of Churches' Digital Needs in a Post-Pandemic Era**

In this fifth and final Tech Trend paper of the *Tech in Churches during COVID-19* project, we explore the current needs and challenges congregations continue to face related to technology use and integration. This paper draws on findings shared in our report 3, *“We’re Still Here’: Reflections of the Post-Pandemic Digital Church”* (see: <https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/handle/1969.1/200172>), which sought to determine how congregations' views of technology and practices of online worship changed between 2020 and 2023. These changes were determined through a follow-up survey of Indiana congregations involved in the Center for Congregations' Connecting Through Tech (CTT) Grant program, which has been the focus of this three-year study.

This report also draws on conversations conducted via several webinars held by our team with other researchers studying technology and churches in the USA and pastors from congregations receiving CTT funding. These webinars aimed to present core findings from Report 3 to stakeholders, solicit responses to our data, and facilitate reactions to their views on the current state of congregations' interaction and investment in technology. This new data enables us to verify our analysis from report three, evaluate the progress, and identify the continued challenges that Indiana congregations and especially leaders face regarding technology implementation and goals.

This tech trend paper highlights issues church pastors and leaders raised about the state of technology in their congregational work and services. In our thematic analysis of these conversations, we noted that there was a marked difference in the concerns and responses of leaders in smaller churches (1-99 congregants) and larger churches (100+ congregants). Thus, below, we first discuss dominant themes related to all congregations as a whole and then separate our discussion into the needs and challenges of smaller congregations versus larger congregations.

Finally, we highlight a few areas regarding congregations' current engagement with technology that we suggest need further exploration, and potential resources that would benefit churches, both large and small, at this time.

## Overall Research Findings from Churches of All Sizes

*More than three years after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, churches across the state of Indiana still experience challenges utilizing technology, which have also contributed to feelings of burnout. Leaders expressed in the webinar that they felt that their “plates were full” and had trouble recruiting and training volunteers to take over technological responsibilities when they lacked knowledge and ability. Altogether, many of them expressed a desire to maintain digital resources in their services, but a skepticism regarding how this would be sustained.*

### **Pastors and leaders still see online churches as the “front door.”**

While the onset of the pandemic may have been with some technological hesitancy, our previous research has shown that most churches see digital services and resources as helpful and permanent tools in their ministry toolbox. In the webinar, leaders expressed a sincere desire to improve their technology use and offerings, as it is now seen as the “front door” to the church. Leaders recognize people often visit online services to test their interest in a potential church without the nerves that come with entering the building. While many individuals may test out a new church community or a religious denomination for the first time, virtual options enable this process without all the logistical challenges that might accompany an in-person visit.

### **Locating and training tech volunteers is still a challenge.**

Church leaders in both large and small congregations shared that during the onset of the pandemic and lockdowns, it was much easier to find volunteers to help run technology and assist with livestreaming services. Now, there is a serious issue with sustainability. Churches have difficulty finding volunteers with the skillset or desire to learn technology. If they do find a volunteer who is willing to try to run digital technology, they encounter issues related to the longevity of their volunteerism and the translatability of digital knowledge for volunteers.

### **Churches are still in need of digital resources and technology advice.**

Regardless of size, congregation leaders and staff indicated that while they are more than three years post the onset of COVID-19, digital questions and needs still arise. Many echoed a desire for more guidance on technological decisions and advice as they often feel unequipped to answer them independently. For example, one church leader in rural Indiana reported that they bought a camera during the pandemic that they thought would enable them to livestream, but they were wrong. Now, the church is left with an expensive camera and no idea how to utilize it.

## **Smaller Churches Research Findings: Challenges of Sustainability and Short-Term Planning**

*From churches with congregations under 100 people, we heard that many are still experiencing basic technology challenges related to week-to-week church planning. Pastors and main leaders shared that they still feel ill-equipped to navigate technological questions, specifically about running cameras, microphones, and live streams. Ultimately, the leaders and pastors reflected more short-term needs and urgent questions.*

### **Smaller church pastors and leaders still experience burnout.**

Another key finding that churches shared during the webinar is that, consistent with our data, smaller churches are the ones with the most burnout, concerns, and questions. Churches with small staff and congregations feel burned out, both in general and with technological fatigue as they navigate questions, concerns, and breakdowns. One church pastor shared feelings of being burdened by sermon preparation in addition to setting up their cameras and microphones.

### **Church leaders feel they lack the time and the skill set to run technology.**

One church leader shared that their church doesn't "...have the skills, and I don't have the time." Churches have felt the challenges of running technology but now, years later, they still do not feel that they have adequately built up the skillset to properly engage with technology. They cited skills such as digital knowledge to set up, problem-solve, and run technology. Additionally, because they are often overburdened with tasks, they do not have the time to learn new technologies, seek tutorials, and utilize the digital media they are trying to work with.

### **Pastors are still overburdened with technological decision-making and responsibilities.**

Consistent with a variety of our quantitative and qualitative data, most leaders shared feelings of stress and being overwhelmed in maintaining their technology and digital resources even years after the pandemic and grant. For example, while some strategies have changed now that the churches are back in person, navigating new skills like hybrid worship has demonstrated that pastors still must make hard technological decisions.

### **Leaders long for a clear-cut, concise, and basic understanding of digital technology.**

One church leader shared in the webinar that they felt they were in "information overload." Across the state of Indiana, churches shared their desire and need for a resource or explanation of how to run technology or digital resources easily and effectively. They admitted their lack of knowledge but felt a severe gap in simple explanations left them feeling overburdened by so much information. They requested a "digital manual" of some sort, one that resembles a succinct instructional guideline.

### **Pastors and leaders cannot explain the technology that they do not understand.**

Another theme that we discovered and discussed with grant recipients is that there seem to be issues with advertising and recruiting volunteers for jobs that the leaders themselves cannot explain. One pastor shared that she struggled to request that her congregation volunteer for

positions that she was unable to do herself, such as creating an e-giving portal or redesigning the Wi-Fi system.

**Larger Churches Research Findings:  
Challenges of Development and Long-Term Planning**

*What we heard from churches with congregations of over 100 members were challenges related to the long-term implementation, system, and plan for technology in churches. They echoed questions related to the ways that systems of technology and digital resources could be used to maintain and grow the church's media and technological plan.*

**Not everyone can just “volunteer” to assist with technology needs.**

One church leader from Indiana eloquently shared that: “There’s a narrow gap for people who can do this: willing, able, and faithful.” While the initial challenge may be finding a volunteer who is willing to try, there are more challenges if the individual is going to have the necessary skills and abilities to function in that role. Moreover, churches expressed a desire for the individuals to be faithful to the church and the job.

**The sustainability of tech volunteers is an issue.**

Churches shared that one consistent challenge they face, even after years of work with technology during the COVID-19 pandemic, is the unpredictability of volunteers. One church leader reported that they might have a teen tech volunteer for a few months, but then they graduate from high school. After, the church is left to find and train a new teenager, and the process would then repeat itself. They discussed longing for a more sustainable option, such as consistent training offered for rotating volunteers or older, more permanent congregants feeling confident in their technological skills.

**Leaders long for a “systemized way of doing media.”**

Church leaders shared their challenges in re-creating the system every few months. They specifically long for a cut-and-dry, consistent, and predictable way to utilize technology. One shared the challenges they face in the different types of digital technology and that they desire a more systematic way of doing media.

**Tech volunteers and/or staff still must convince pastors of their usefulness.**

Larger churches with specific staff or roles related to technology also have specific needs. One staff member who oversees technology as a part of their role shared their need at times to advocate for the utilization and utility of technology. While we are far past the implementation of technology in 2020, they described an existing hesitation towards it that remains.

**Pastors and leaders are still unsure how to use online resources for certain church needs.**

While churches expressed a desire to maintain their church online and with digital resources, some leaders expressed continued questions and confusion regarding how important church functions such as discipleship could be maintained. One church member discussed the

challenges of continuing to invest in the congregation and utilizing online ministry to do so. They still felt ill-equipped to know how to use digital resources to shepherd their church members.

**Tips to Move Forward:  
Reflections and Highlights of What Churches Need**

**Filling in the technological knowledge gap.**

Churches made clear that there are notable gaps in their knowledge regarding the use of digital resources in a church setting. Many leaders admitted that being older and overburdened with their regular duties, impacted their ability to invest adequate time and energy into tech learning. This knowledge gap was often worsened or exacerbated by “information overload” that came with attempts to research new tech options, leading them further into feelings of paralysis over technology decision-making. One church member described not knowing which technology to purchase, feeling overwhelmed with the available options, and deciding not to do anything.

**Developing a repository of resources.**

Because of this admitted knowledge gap within churches, the leaders stated a desire and need for a “repository of resources.” By this, they mean a database or site that would store helpful strategies, information, or links that would allow them to easily discover and learn about technology applications and strategies, or ask questions. They long for best practices and technology tips that are free and easy to understand. Some leaders utilized or suggested creating a space on a site such as a Facebook group, where members of churches or similar denominations could ask questions, offer advice, or just discuss how they successfully implemented technology.

**Offering step-by-step how-technology to church leaders.**

Finally, churches requested “step-by-step” how-to instructions for technology implementation. They felt frustrated by overly confusing explanations or long, drawn-out manuals. Instead, they felt that they could best learn and be energized for action by quick explanations that were simple and concise.

**Providing guides, websites, or workshops.**

Churches and leaders explained the need for websites, workshops, or guides about specific tech offerings and how digital resources might be utilized to accomplish specific tasks or needs. For example, one church admitted the continued need for e-giving but lacked awareness of how to easily and affordably develop this. They asked about the possibility of a workshop for churches about online donation options and processes.

### **Creating a network of resources.**

Finally, churches admitted that they often feel alone in their questions. In conversation together in our webinar, they found solace in the mutual needs of other pastors. They felt a network of other pastors with similar challenges would allow them a place for input and question-asking. One church leader stated they are a member of a Facebook group for their specific denomination, in which they ask questions and share advice about technology. The current situation presents an opportunity to create a network of church leaders, regardless of their denominational background, around sharing ideas about digital media and ministry.

### **Summary of Research Project and Context**

This tech trend paper examines specific findings of how churches engaged with technology that emerged from the *Tech in Churches during COVID-19* research project funded by the Lilly Endowment. This project investigates congregations' technological negotiations and decision-making patterns in the American Midwest during the COVID-19 pandemic. This report is put together by the *Network for New Media, Religion and Digital Culture Studies* under the direction of Dr. Heidi A. Campbell. It analyzes data provided by the Center for Congregations in Indianapolis, Indiana through its "Connect Through Tech" grant program. A grant program that funded 2700 congregations in the state of Indiana purchases of technology resources in 2020 and 2021, which helped facilitate the move from traditional to online services. Here, we highlight themes emerging from a series of "Tech Talk" sessions facilitated by the Center for Congregational leaders who received grants in which technology challenges and opportunities emerging from the shift online were discussed.