



Report Synopsis of

When Pastors Put on the “Tech Hat”: How Churches Digitized During COVID-19

“When Pastors Put on the ‘Tech Hat’: How Churches Digitized During COVID-19” is a 25-page report released in November 2021 which investigates how pastors and church leaders used technology, their decision-making processes, and the sources of tension or challenge that they faced. It analyzes data from the “Connect Through Tech” grant program of the Center for Congregations in Indianapolis, which supported more than 2700 congregations across Indiana in 2020 and 2021. The grant program enabled congregations to purchase digital equipment and other technological resources to facilitate their transition from traditional offline meetings to digital, online services during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The report explores the questions: (1) who is making the technological decisions in churches, (2) what challenges congregations have faced in implementing digital technology, (3) what the experience of transitioning into digital culture and spaces has raised for pastors, (4) what successes about the use of technology are worth noting, and finally, (5) whether digital forms of worship are a short-term or long-term strategy for post-pandemic churches. The analysis of these five discussion points revealed interesting themes about pastors, congregations, churches’ views of technology, and the culture of church which are highlighted below.

Pastors — Pastors are “wearing the tech hat.”

- Of the many new “hats” pastors were required to add to their already full jobs, many felt the “tech hat” was the one they were least prepared to handle.
- Pastors and leaders from small and rural churches often had no previous experience or any equipment to work with, so they had to use creativity and trial and error to go digital.

Congregations— Can digital media create that “Sunday morning feeling”?

- The intimidation of technology did not stop people from volunteering to help or become part of emerging “tech teams.”
- Technologically-adverse or hesitant congregation members often took issue with the shift towards doing church online.
- Volunteers, along with staff, who were initially enthusiastic are now burned out and have often lost the desire to serve in tech roles, but remain dedicated because they feel they must.

About Technology — Going Digital, “The Struggle Is Real”

- Going online offered churches new opportunities to reach beyond their normal congregational and geographic limits that was unexpected (e.g., new places, old members, distant family)
- A central struggle churches had with technology was the question of how they could effectively serve and care for their elderly members without technology access and knowledge.
- The digital shift proved a steep learning curve for congregations but created a unique space for innovation (e.g., Zoom as a creative resource, experimenting with drive-through communion, adapting to changing safety guidelines, constant innovation).

About the Culture of the Church — “It just doesn’t feel like Church should.”

- The digital shift has challenged and changed pastors’ ideas about what the church is, should be, and how community connections are made and sustained.
- The concept of community has been difficult to define and cultivate for many churches in their online programs and ministries. For many, digitally-mediated community does not feel “real.”

Overall, the report explores the themes, struggles, and successes that are consistent among many small, Midwest congregations as they navigated keeping the Church alive and running during the COVID-19 pandemic. This report is part of a larger research project exploring churches’ decision-making processes regarding technology during the pandemic. *Tech in Churches During COVID-19* is a research project funded by the Lilly Endowment that explores the evolving relationship between technology and religious congregations during the COVID-19 pandemic. The project is led by Heidi A. Campbell, professor of Communication and Presidential Impact Fellow at Texas A&M University and director of the Network for New Media, Religion and Digital Culture Studies.

For more information about this research project see: <https://www.techinchurches.org/>

The full report is available online at: <https://bit.ly/churchesdigitalized>