Tech Trend Paper 4:
Diverse Congregations, Similar Experiences

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Diverse Congregations, Similar Experiences: How Pastors of Different Ethnic and Racial Churches Encountered Similar Issues and Opportunities During the COVID-19 Pandemic

OVERALL RESEARCH FINDING—
While churches across Indiana come from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, the Covid-19 pandemic created a similar shared experience across these churches. Despite their diversity and varying access to digital resources, churches exhibited surprisingly similar views when approaching digital challenges and opportunities with the same set of assumptions about churches and technologies.

It might be assumed churches coming from diverse cultural backgrounds would also express notable differences in how they conceptualize, operate, and envision the role of church, especially during times of crisis. However, despite having differing access to resources and levels of technological preparedness, this study found that congregations from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds in Indiana responded surprisingly similar to the digital shift that was required of their congregations during the Covid-19 pandemic. In our study of Indiana churches use of technology during the pandemic, we found White, African American and Multicultural congregations all approached digital technology as an essential "tool" to be used to solve the problem of sustaining weekly gatherings. The only notable difference was a slight shift between 2020 to 2021 in African American congregations manifested in their perceptions of technology. These congregations began the pandemic conceptualizing technology as a simple tool to help them replicate in-person gatherings, but a year later they primarily saw technology as an innovative way to build new community connections. Interestingly, a similar shift in perspective was not noted amongst White congregations.

Breakdown of churches that received the *Connect Through Tech* grant from the Center for Congregations:

A variety of congregations across Indiana applied for the Connect Through Tech (CTT) grant offered by the Indianapolis-based Center for Congregations. Of the 2200 churches looked at in this report, an overwhelming majority (68%), described themselves as White and English-speaking churches. Of the 32% that represented other racial and ethnic minorities, there were 337 (23%) churches that identified themselves as Multicultural, and 134 (9%) that identified as Black/African American, with only .8% identifying as Hispanic and .3% as Asian congregations.

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Due to the low representation of Asian & Hispanic congregations within the study sample, we focused our discussion on comparing the views and responses of White, multicultural, and African American congregations regarding the relationship between the church and technology during the pandemic. It is important to note that the racial and ethnic demographics were self-reported designations, and the term "Multicultural" was left as an undefined, broad category for which no specific racial compositions or breakdowns were available.

Also most of the grants were received by congregations in rural areas. Meaning, the term "multicultural" likely does not denote a large, non-denominational, multi-ethnic church, as is typically thought of in more suburban or urban areas. Instead, "multicultural" likely means a more variable rural congregation, consisting of the cultural groups in that town. It is important to consider this demographic characteristic of rurality as readers work through this Tech Trend paper.

It is also important to note that this Tech Trend paper is derived from the second stage of data collected for Report 2, "Mission to Serve Tech: Churches 'Lock Down' Technology During the Global Pandemic," released in February 2023 (https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/handle/1969.1/197075).

What the results indicate—*similarities*

Across the board, churches from all racial and ethnic backgrounds focused primarily on the functionality, or perceived uses of technology for ministry. Our study indicates that regardless of their racial or ethnic breakdown, churches initially saw the purpose and use of technology, in very similar ways. White, Black, and Multicultural congregations all reported they initially approached technology as a utilitarian resource l to be used to move their services online when in-person meetings were no longer possible. They saw the primary purpose of technology as a tool that allowed them to circumvent pandemic-related restrictions and to continue to offer worship services. In general, churches saw technology as a tool for connection, allowing people to communicate and meet with one another through messaging, social media, and Facebook groups, despite social restrictions. This was the primary orientation of congregations no matter their backgrounds throughout the pandemic.

All congregations primarily defined the church as a "shared gathering." Churches from all ethnic and racial backgrounds in this study indicated they conceptualized the "church" as a gathering of people. This is understood as individuals congregating together in a set context to share in a religious ceremony or for religious purposes. Thus all congregations seemed to emphasize the idea of the church as a congregation of people in a shared space, meeting at a set time, either off or online. This understanding of "church" as a gathering of people, shows all demographics felt having a common setting, event and/or connection point for their members was central to their identity.

White, Black, and Multicultural churches also shared a common understanding of the primary mission of the church as defined by providing a service to their church congregants, an opportunity/place of worship, and to engage with those in more vulnerable states. Churches from all three groups saw their "mission," meaning their central pursuit or goal of their church, similarly and in even with the same order of importance. First, churches saw their main mission as providing church services to members of their congregation. Next, churches regardless of racial breakdown, ranked providing a distinct worship experience, their secondary purpose of their church. Finally, all churches reported that their third most common part of their mission was providing church services for those who were unable to attend, particularly because of their more vulnerable state (i.e., immunocompromised, the elderly, etc.). Thus no matter the diversity or make-up of these congregations, our data shows Indiana churches central mission is seen as providing a church service to those who are members of their congregation. This points towards why churches valued technology access and opportunities during the COVID-19 pandemic, without it they could not do what they saw as their central calling.

All churches in this study acknowledged they felt successful utilizing technology during the COVID-19 pandemic. White and minority churches rated their perceived successes with technology in the same order and importance. First, and beyond the shared emphasis of technology allowing them to keep services going, minority and White churches recognized technology allowed them to address specific health and safety concerns related to COVID-19, especially as online service allowed members with specific fears to remain a part of the church. Next, churches recognized that technology provided unique opportunities for church growth and service expansion, as members from near and far joined in worship services via livestream. Finally, churches of Black, Multicultural, and White congregations all noted technology created more potential for diversifying their congregations, as new visitors from different geographies and communities were able to visit and even later to fully join their church community. This is significant as it allows us a more in-depth understanding of how these secondary or 'minor' benefits of technology utilization during the pandemic, enabled similar successes throughout all congregations.

In reflecting a year after the pandemic, the vast majority of churches saw the relationship between the church and technology as a positive one. Churches, regardless of their demographic makeup, described technology as a positive resource benefitting their church. Most churches of all racial/ethnic makeups saw the relationship between church and technology as a positive asset, not a negative hindrance. Churches also similarly reported that they viewed technology as compatible with church ministry and goals, when it was utilized as a tool or helpmate. Churches of all demographics also saw the relationship between church and technology as essential. The smallest percentage of all races/ethnicities saw the relationship as conflictual.

White, Black, and multicultural churches saw their focus move from online-only, to churches entertaining the idea or offering hybrid services at some point during the pandemic; and they were excited by this new opportunity. Regardless of background, churches saw the focus of their work during the pandemic to be on both online and offline services. By 2021 many viewed the hybrid church option as a way to fully meet different needs and expectations of their congregations. While a few churches continued solely online into late 2021, they indicated hybrid services might be an option for them in the future. Many churches said they planned to continue online and hybrid service indefinitely, describing this newly realized form of church as innovative, exciting, and of great importance. Only a relatively small group indicated that the future and focus of their church would only be in-person, offline gatherings.

What the results indicate—*differences*

Minority churches found the greatest success or benefit offered by technology during the pandemic as something different than White churches. Black and Multicultural churches emphasized that having the opportunity to use technology to engage members through the convenience of online services was their greatest success. Whereas, White churches reported their primary success in using technology during the pandemic to be its ability to enable the creation of new programs that could continue after the pandemic.

Churches that identified as non-White emphasized using technology during the pandemic to create community connections, which was central to the mission of their church, more so than White churches. Study findings showed that churches that identified as Black or Multicultural more often responded that they viewed community creation as an essential part of their mission, as compared to White churches, who saw providing a service for congregants and outsiders as more central. This finding is worth further investigation, because it suggests potentially different views of the primary focus of the church in different racial and ethnic communities, and the extent to which the church should be or is inward versus outward focused.

White churches saw the church as more of an event or a service, rather than solely a community of people, contradicting the views held by Black and Multicultural churches. While all racial and ethnic categories of churches primarily saw the role of the church as to offer worship service or create a gathering in a shared space (physical building). However, the order of rankings differed by ethnicity. For example, more White churches in this study emphasized using technology to hold a "service" as their central goal as a church during the pandemic. Whereas Black and Multicultural churches ranked using technology to build "community" over holding "services" as the primary goals. What we see is that when forced to focus their goals, it is diverse racial congregations that may view community orientation and building as more central to their mission and purpose than other churches.

Key Takeaways

1. **When considering church's views about technology during the pandemic most congregations responded similarly despite coming from ethnic or racial backgrounds.** We can see throughout our data, to our surprise, that churches from diverse demographics had many of the same conceptualizations of the church (the mission, focus, etc.). This is reflected by many pastors who stressed that technology was a tool for keeping the work of their church going. For example, a pastor at a White church, described how he used the CTT grant to purchase technologies and equipment to live stream all their Sunday School classes, weekly Bible Studies, and morning Worship Services, " Before receiving the grant we did not utilize social media as a means to reach people. This grant...helped the church to maintain an important spiritual connection with our membership … as well as family members of our church members that were not connected to a church family." Many Black and Multicultural churches across Indiana voice a similar emphasis showing on the hierarchy of church goals, holding service is central to their mission.

2. **During the COVID-19 pandemic, many churches with different demographic groups encountered the same questions and issues related to technology decision-making.** We find churches faced many of the same questions regardless of their demographic makeup. For example, all churches in this study reported churches having spent much focused time considering whether their services should be online, offline, or go hybrid. This was also a decision that kept having to revisit at multiple times during the pandemic.. One church described this as "The purchase [of] a streaming box… would give us more options as well as deliver a better quality of streaming to our congregation and anyone else around the world that would tune into our services." This church faced this same question several times, each time deciding which technologies they should use or add, and having to adapt to the online and then hybrid services. While churches may not have come to the same conclusion about how or when to perform different versions of online or offline worship, all congregations in this study had to reconcile this question within their congregations, regardless of ethnicity.

3. **From the data at hand, we can see that minority churches may see community building and engaging members as more central to their decision for embracing technology.** While there were many similarities across the different congregations, minority churches tended to view the way technology offers a way to recreate community engagement in a new context. Whereas, White churches may focus on using technology for utilitarian and programmatic purposes, such as expanding their congregation. As one African American church leader in Indiana stated, "We are continuing to livestream one of our morning services, as well our Sunday evening service. Those who have been sick or shut in have been able to remain a part of the

worshiping community, not only watching the service but checking in with their comments. Members who are out of town or on vacation also watch the services, when they would not have been able to do that before. Yesterday, one of our members watched the service and checked in while on vacation in Alaska!" This sense of community building was echoed across many other Multicultural and minority churches, more so than their White counterparts.

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.