

Overview Report of Key Findings From *The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online*

As the entire world has in some way been altered by the COVID-19 pandemic, pastors and religious leaders have had to make unprecedented decisions on how to quickly organize their congregations and meeting to turn their in-person communities into online ones. In *The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online* (2020), published by the Network for New Media, Religion and Digital Culture Studies, Heidi Campbell has gathered thirty researchers and pastors to reflect on their experiences during this unusual period and highlight issues churches need to consider in adapting to these changes.

Many of the pastors wrote of the profound opportunity that they felt the COVID-19 pandemic offered. It forced Internet-hesitant pastors to recognize the necessity of utilizing digital platforms and livestream to reach out to their congregations. Pastors are experimenting with innovative ways to move previously in-person moments online, offering virtual coffee breaks for their member and online morning prayers. As many of the pastors wrote about, discovering surprising abilities that helped their church get online quickly, many within 24 hours of making that decision.

Yet the cultural transition required at this time is not without its challenges. Many pastors in this collection come from rural churches, with elderly congregations, or those with special needs that have struggled to learn the new technology to remain connected. As Floberg explains: "...going online leaves out some of our members. Those who cannot afford computers, smart TVs, smart phones, and/or reliable Internet are difficult to reach" (pg. 18). Additionally, the elderly population, those who have attended for much of their lives, are the most vulnerable. They noted some innovations like staff members at nursing homes that helped the church members livestream their services, reminding the reader that "If even traditional communities like ours can adapt to sudden change, then the church is healthier and more resilient than we have believed" (pg. 28).

Religious leaders also emphasized the importance maintaining social distancing at this time, but also building connections with their congregations. As Elbert writes, "All of this is happening to ensure the support and retention of the congregation. After all, what is a church without a congregation?" (pg. 13). Additionally, pastors recognize social distancing becomes an opportunity for making their people increasingly aware of their need for relationships. Lambert explains that "...in the age of social distancing, people are becoming more aware of their need for deep friendship" (pg. 20). In a world where superficial conversations exist online and offline, churches have a new opportunity to serve as important connection point and potentially facilitate deep friendships. As Lambert reminds us that the "...church is uniquely positioned to step into that gap digitally and then carry the torch forward long after social distancing is behind us" (pg. 21).

Similarly, researcher essays in *The Distanced Church* drew attention to the social and technological challenges digitally mediated meetings can create for churches. With emphasis often being on the technological skills and resources churches need to go online, they noted the potential to forget about essential elements of spiritual community and liturgical communication that transcend technology. Sbardelotto explains "With the eagerness to transmit celebrations, there is a risk of transforming the rites into mere spectacles" and "forget that there is a *person* on the other side of the screen" (pg. 75). This caused many of the researchers to encourage church leaders to develop a digital literacy both for themselves and their congregations. Thumma said "relatively few faith communities made meaningful use of the tech they had except for basic tools like email, websites, Wi-Fi in the building" and as they have been forced to adapt during the pandemic, they "reside on shaky foundation" (pg. 80).

Importantly, many researcher's essays stated that the forcible shift from offline church towards community online, raised important questions about what the "church" is and should be in the future. They argued that this period should be used as an opportunity to explore what members really want and need out of church beyond a livestreamed service, in terms of connection and community. Dyer points out that "experimenting with different forms of media and observing how they change, reshape, add to, and take away from the in-person experience can also help clergy see the in-person experience more clearly and find new ways to connect throughout the week" (pg. 53). Other researchers noted the importance of creating new types of participatory and interactive services, in which the users feel included and are not just bystanders. Zsupan-Jerome encourages communities of faith "...to examine and clarify what it is that they are doing when they gather for worship, what is essential about it and what can change" (pg. 93). This led to discussions of social distancing as a space to rethink what the future of the church looks like. Lewis explained that churches should "...think about the values they hold, listen to their congregations [...], and think about what lessons they will take from the current crisis about how they may do church" (pg. 65). Overwhelmingly, the researchers identified that the COVID-19 pandemic should not just be seen as the moment that forced churches to go online, but a space for churches to examine their core beliefs, religious identity, and understanding of missions.

Key Claims by Pastors:

- 1. Moving Church online represents a shift in relationship between the online & offline.**
Pastors often viewed the church and the Internet as being two separate entities. The COVID-19 pandemic has proved to be a catalyst for them to reconsider the relationship between the online and offline.
- 2. Social Distance, but don't forget about people's relational needs.**
Many essays remind church leaders not to lose sight of their community amidst implementing new technologies. Moving church online can create a social gap between members and leaders. Pastors need to remember those behind the screen are those they are called to care for and not just preach to.
- 3. Remember vulnerable populations in Church when going digital.**
Some vulnerable groups and congregations are falling behind in the online church world; especially the elderly or those without Internet access. Church leaders must imagine creative ways to connect with these vulnerable, yet valuable members.

Key Claims by Researchers:

- 1. Digital literacy is important.**
Many pastors forced online are struggling, not just with the technological skills needed, but understanding the culture of the digital world. This demonstrates the importance of digital literacy.
- 2. Social Distancing should lead to a re-examination of what "Church" is.**
Using new technology and bringing on techies to help with worship should cause pastors to reconsider what they want their church to be. This means re-thinking the structure of services, and how this fits into the religious identity they seek to cultivate
- 3. Hope that new relationships between digital media and the Church will arise.**
Many researchers note the new relationship forming between church leaders and technology represents a hopeful shift. The church's resilience and creativity has been demonstrated throughout this pandemic, which could lead to potentially long-lasting changes as they adapt.