

**10 TRENDS RELIGIOUS GROUPS NEED TO UNDERSTAND  
TO SURVIVE AND THRIVE IN THE NEXT DECADE**

# **WHAT SHOULD POST- PANDEMIC RELIGION LOOK LIKE?**

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**HEIDI A CAMPBELL & TROY SHEPHERD**

*What Should Post-Pandemic Religion Look Like? 10 Trends Religious Groups Need to Understand to Survive and Thrive in the Next Decade*

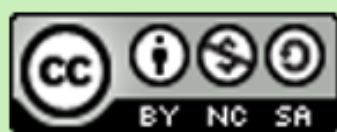
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# INTRODUCTION

It has been a year since COVID-19 and the global pandemic became a part of our everyday reality. Our rhythms of daily life became dramatically altered from how we work, how our kids go to school and how we undertake basic tasks like shopping or eating out. Religious groups and houses of worship have struggled with the reality of masking, quarantine, and social distancing. Even though a vaccine has arrived, the old normal is still a distant memory.

The past year has been a time for many religious communities to learn how to adapt by creating new forms of gathering and outreach, oftentimes with significant resistance and growing pains. Over the past year, we have reflected on how religion has and will continue to have to change to respond to social conditions and health requirements created by the COVID-19 pandemic. We see that some of these adaptations are here to stay and the ways we do religion may be forever changed because of the global health crisis, and this we believe is not a bad thing.

Over the past year, we have reflected on how our research on religion over the past two decades has provided us with some unique insights to be able to speak into this moment. We shared some of these over the course of the year through various articles, social media posts, our websites, and our podcast “Disruptive Dialogues on the Future of Religion.” Here, we bring together these conversations to share our collective insights and wisdom of what a post-pandemic religion might need to look like to ensure religious groups are able to thrive in this new environment.

This eBook offers ten lessons from the pandemic experience that we believe religious leaders need to seriously consider in order to cultivate resilience in their work and ministry. We draw these specifically from ideas shared in a series of three eBooks that Dr. Heidi Campbell compiled in 2020 on how religious communities and their worship were being shaped by the conditions of the pandemic. The Distanced Church brought church leaders and media scholars together to consider the practical challenges created for churches during their forced migration to online worship and ministry in early 2020.

Religion in Quarantine brought together Religious Studies scholars to reflect on how people's spiritual journeys, as well as their study of religion, were being shaped by these times of quarantine and social distancing. Digital Ecclesiology addressed in greater depth the ecclesiological questions embracing digital media and culture that the pandemic raised for churches in the long run.

Collectively, these books sought not only to highlight the challenges that emerged, but to focus attention on the potential that the pandemic could bring about positive shifts in both the way we "do" and "think" about religion. We suggest that religious innovation and adaptation continue to be demanded of religious communities. For religious groups, the "new normal" means there may never be a full return to the business of religion as it once was, i.e., event dependent, offline only, and fixed to one location. Here, we highlight ten lessons shared in the conclusions of these eBooks and expand on what they mean and the implications they have for religion in a post-pandemic reality.

**Religious leaders are being forced to reconcile their concerns about technology with the clear benefits provided by the Internet during this time.**

"Over the next decade [...] upwards of 100 million Americans will rely upon the Internet to deliver some aspects of their religious experience."

Source

<https://www.christianheadlines.com/articles/the-years-most-intriguing-findings-from-barna-research-1110248.html> and [www.barna.org](http://www.barna.org)

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Doing religious gatherings and ministry has been difficult for many religious groups during this time, especially for those that had previously been hesitant or resisted to using the Internet or technology in a worship setting. The pandemic, however, forced many groups to go online and reconsider how technology could be seen as a benefit, instead of a threat to authentic religion. Over the last two decades, researchers studying religion and the internet have highlighted the undeniable benefits that moving different aspects of religious work online can offer religious groups. A growing literature exists that illustrates how moving online can potentially expand religious group influence to a new audience and create unique opportunities for outreach.

While some may still argue that online worship seems incomplete or limited, embracing technology for religious purposes has shown to be a vital strategy during the pandemic and beyond in the decade to come.



# A POINT TO PONDER



Consider the difference in what it means to be “mission minded” vs “traditional focused” when it comes to ministry. How can you still focus on your mission, while being creative in how you incorporate technology?

**Experimenting with worship online revealed the power of technology that many religious groups were unaware of before.**

An example of engaging worship and technology creatively...

"Church Space is a mobile app that connects vacant church spaces with ministries, business owners, and event professionals seeking space at an affordable rate."

Source

<https://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/us/2019/december/churches-join-the-hottest-new-business-trend-the-sharing->

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While some religious groups and gatherings have been using digital media for a decade or more, many more traditional or mainline religious communities made their first appearances online because of the COVID-19 pandemic. For those groups, the transition online required a quick learning curve that was not without its mistakes and challenges. This created a need to gain technical insights and consider new tactics and strategies in order to maintain a connection with their congregations. Doing worship online gave them hands-on learning about the affordances or advantages digital technologies can offer religious groups in bridging time-space boundaries and building connections not possible in their offline reality.

# A POINT TO PONDER



Digital culture has embraced the notion of a “sharing economy,” yet religious groups have struggled to grasp collaboration or shared access and resources with other religious groups. What would a “sharing economy” look like if religious groups shared resources or offered support to each other?

**Mediated worship begs the question: “How much of religion is, or needs to be, embodied?”**

“There’s no one person or company that has cracked the code to the digital world. There’s no universal formula for success. But I do believe that not using digital is a sure way to fail.”

Source

<http://www.toryburchfoundation.org/resources/marketing/5-tips-for-building-a-digital-community/>

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As churches move from in-person communities to online ones, many researchers suggested that these experiences shine a new light on what it means for religion to be embodied. Even with its limitation mediated, online worship allowed congregations to engage in many core religious practices or rituals and express their religious values in new but tangible ways. These experiences beg the question: How much of religion is actually or must be embodied to be authentic? In a period where people are not allowed to gather together, if the essence of religion is based on embodied gathering, the very definition of what is or can be is held to questions.

Yet the social conditions brought on by the pandemic and their continued presence also brings to question whether religious gatherings and ministry in the coming decade can be limited solely to offline, embodied gatherings. Purely offline worship and religious work may not be possible for some due to health restrictions or local social limitations in the foreseeable future. Religious groups may need to come to terms with the fact that hybrid or online combined with offline worship may need to become the new norm to fully encourage their constituents.

# A POINT TO PONDER



If true religion should be the observance of practices ground in our values, instead of just prescribing to a list of rules, could an online mediated platform provide a new negotiation as to what a faith relationship truly means and looks like in one's daily life?

**Social distancing practices and the creation of online worship services spotlight what religious groups actually see as their core beliefs and defining practices.**

"Only 40% of pastors surveyed indicated willingness to change their mind, once it's made up about an important topic."

Source

<https://www.greatcommandment.net/statistics>

2020 was marked by periods of increased isolation, with many not being able to meet face-to-face. This has caused many people to rethink what are the fundamental beliefs and practices of their religion. For example, researchers have found that while some churches proudly proclaim, via their mission statements, that they are focused on discipleship or outreach, what the pandemic revealed is that they were primarily in the worship service delivery business. When groups sought to replicate religion during lockdowns, arguably for many, almost all of their time and investment was spent seeking to replicate their worship service online. This and other revelations should challenge religious institutions to re-evaluate whether their stated mission and identity are actually lived out by their faith community.

So navigating the challenges of social distancing can be seen as a catalyst that pushes many religious groups into examining how they define and live out religion in the United States and the western world. Do a religious group's core beliefs only get expressed when they are tied to a building, programs, or an event? Where else was time invested during the pandemic to keep the business of the community up and running?

# A POINT TO PONDER



Spend some time calculating the number of volunteer hours spent each week maintaining the weekly event, the programs, and the maintenance of a location. Could those weekly hours be better spent volunteering and serving in your local community, reaching the lost, the forgotten, and those who are truly struggling?

**Religious communities that are flexible and willing to innovate during this time are better positioned to foster resilience in the long run.**

"If outside forces and culture were the reasons behind declining and non-influential churches, we would likely have no churches today. The greatest periods of growth, particularly the first-century growth, took place in adversarial cultures. We are not hindered by external forces; we are hindered by our own lack of commitment and selflessness."

Source

Thom S. Rainer, *I Am a Church Member: Discovering the Attitude that Makes the Difference*

Being flexible was a core trait required of many religious communities and their members in 2020. Within days of learning of the state of the crisis and lockdowns in the United States, many religious leaders were able to be innovative with the centuries-old traditions and ways of doing church. Some technological experiments were successful and some failed. Worship liturgies had to be revamped to adapt to the limits and opportunities created via technologically-dependent worship.

This willingness to experiment in new and dynamic environments helped religious groups prepare their traditions or congregations for future situations that may require changes and encourage religious creativity. By being willing to test out new technologies and experiment with novel ways to celebrate, together these institutions encourage adaptation. This forced flexibility shows dwindling congregations they can revive religion and build communities able to adapt to changing conditions around them.



Being able to pivot and adapt also creates the possibility for religious groups to evaluate and potentially realign their work and practices with their mission statement or faith commitment in ways that are more closely aligned. It is also important to remember that while for many church leaders, this was their first experience having to adapt to intense change, for the Church as a whole, this is not new. The church has survived for thousands of years amidst environmental, political, and social changes. While many people struggle with change, cultural and social shifts often require it. Churches are institutions that often resist or are slow to embrace change. The pandemic showed being able to pivot was a valuable and vital skill required for longevity.

## A POINT TO PONDER

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While the pandemic may have shown religious groups the importance of a streamlined event, the event cannot be the whole product. As a faith group's perspective begins to change to meet the idea of pivoting and changing their model to reflect their mission, what seems impossible becomes just an obstacle. How might obstacles be more easily overcome when priorities and perspectives are aligned?

**The digital innovations made during a time of national quarantine should continue past the crisis, just in a different way. Lessons learned about how to reach out and leverage tech for ministry are vital to incorporate in a dynamic, changing world.**

"Our greatest fear should not be of failure, but of succeeding at things in life that don't really matter."

Source  
Francis Chan

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While some religious leaders and groups asserted the need to return back to the normal of their religious traditions and practices as soon as possible, there is increasing evidence and argument to be made that digital innovations should most certainly continue post-pandemic. Many church leaders agree that certain elements of the digital or hybrid church have proved highly valuable, such as the ability to offer both online and offline opportunities to engage in worship simultaneously for those with different needs and restrictions. We charge religious groups to seriously consider keeping some aspects of digital practice as part of their ministry offering past the current crisis.

Many groups have invested much time and financial resources getting their worship services online and should treat this as a long-term goal instead of a short-term investment. This means seeing digital work and ministry as complementary to previously established offline practice.

# A POINT TO PONDER



Instead of asking the question: What is a digital ministry?  
Let's ask the question: Aren't all religious followers engaged at some level with doing ministry while incorporating the digital? Religious leaders who can embrace thinking about their ministry as a combination of digital and embodied will be modeling only what most other non-religious organizations have been required to do and be over the last two decades.

**The COVID-19 crisis has called for a re- examination on what makes something a faith “community” or church. Can a digital church or temple be seen as a true expression of religion?**

“By (the end of) 2020, five of the top seven digital giants will willfully “self-disrupt” to create their next leadership opportunity.”

Source

<https://thedigitalteacup.com/digital-transformation-quotes/>

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When a physical “space” or building are removed as options for constituting a faith community, what makes something a religious community, church, or temple? The pandemic forced religious leaders to wrestle with this idea, of what is a church when people cannot physically gather together or be place-based. While COVID-19 was difficult for some religious groups, specifically the ones that were Internet-hesitant or Internet-refusers, it proved to be the final push over the edge to join the online community. There are some undeniable benefits that moving online showed to religious groups, which lack of physical resources need not stand in the way from creating a worship gather or community.

Also, it creates access to new potential audiences. Moving online allows these groups to become accessible to previously unreachable groups. Religious leaders should see their experiences with technology as tasking them to determine what is most important for being the church in a digital age. Additionally, defining a community in a period of social isolation requires a re-examination of the theological definition of community. A post-pandemic world requires religious groups to have concrete conversations about what religion is and should be, that consider both the sociological and theological factors that shape this understanding.

## A POINT TO PONDER

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The word church has two separate definitions in culture today: one being a place, the other being a group. Religious identity should never be place dependent and should always be group dependent. Consider what religion + relationship = faith community might look like. Like the quote above, is the church willing to “self-disrupt” to create new opportunities and ways of doing religion?

**Moving Church online represents a shift in how religious groups see the relationship between the online and offline.**

“No leader entered 2020 saying “I hope we're at 36% of where we are right now by the end of the year.” But that's exactly what's happening.”

Source

<https://careynieuwhof.com/3-statistics-that-show-how-quickly-radically-and-permanently-church-is-changing-in-2020/>



Pastors have often viewed the church and the Internet as being two separate entities. The COVID-19 pandemic should be a catalyst for them to reconsider how they see the relationship between the online and offline culture. While many churches are not completely new to online streaming technology or using digital media to advertise their work and do outreach, it was often viewed as an optional addition to their offline service. The pandemic has demonstrated to churches that doing church online as well as offline might be more necessary than previously thought. Technology should be seen as a helpmate of ministry and religious life, extending the reach and personal interaction beyond a single gathering place and religious event. Current and future ministry plans should see online and offline strategies as complementary, or two sides of the same coin.

# A POINT TO PONDER



Our current human reality is a combination of offline and online experiences. Religion is no different. So, the question becomes, how can a religious organization help facilitate the online into their offline practices, and vice versa? The possibilities are literally endless.

**Leaders must rethink how they understand and treat interactions between digital media and the Church.**

“And when any internal or external force tried to change the past, they responded with anger and resolution: ‘We will die before we change.’  
And they did.”

Source

Thom S. Rainer, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church: 12 Ways to Keep Yours Alive*

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This period of social isolation caused many of the researchers to question what this meant for the future of religion. While the move online has been necessary for now, will it continue in the future when it is not essential? Will people return to their places of worship or opt for the new control over their religious engagement offered by audience-driven online experiences? Many researchers and church consultants have noted that the new relationship forming between religious leaders and technology during this time represents a hopeful shift. Religious resilience and creativity have been demonstrated throughout the pandemic, by the embrace of technology. A willingness to experiment with technology shows an openness to change, that could mark a shift toward potentially long-lasting changes and positive approaches to cultural and technological innovations.



# A POINT TO PONDER



The future of religion relies not on the technology itself, but on the religious groups' missional mindset. How might creatively using technology further the Church and its people's religious calling?

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## Remember vulnerable populations in Church when going digital.

“Only 21% (of) church leaders agreed that they have a “well-defined digital ministry strategy to engage with people who are outside the church and outside the faith.” In other words, almost 80% don't.”

Source

<https://careynieuwhof.com/3-statistics-that-show-how-quickly-radically-and-permanently-church-is-changing-in-2020/>

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Some vulnerable groups and congregations are falling behind in the online church world; especially the elderly or those without Internet access. Religious leaders must imagine creative ways to connect with these vulnerable, yet valuable members who do not have access to newer technologies due to a lack of skills or financial resources. Leaders should not let their fascination and embrace of technology lead them to lose sight of the diversity of needs within their communities. Some needs may not be able to be met with technological strategies. Other needs might mean the group cannot use out-of-the-box technology solutions, but rather have to carefully and thoughtfully adopt the technology or create a multi-platform approach so it meets the broadest possible skill and resource levels of the whole community. Moving online can create a social gap between members and leaders. Leaders need to remember those behind the screen are those they are called to care for and not just those to whom they preach to.

# A POINT TO PONDER

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When a religious group is focused outward, towards those who may be struggling, are less educated, or are limited by available resources, etc., the opportunity for growth and relationship increases dramatically, giving merit to the mission of one's faith. Without a religious group being outward focused, it will tend to resist outsiders of a different faith or social background, and treat less favorably those whom their mission seeks to engage.

# CONCLUSION

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Religious groups and leaders that allow themselves to imagine and try out new forms of gathering, relationship building, and community engagement will not only adapt more easily to the conditions created by the COVID-19 pandemic but will create a platform for their faith community that enables them to prepare for and respond to future change. Religious groups often see themselves as those called to change and inform culture. However, the reality of the pandemic should be a wake-up call to religious leaders that, in many cases, found that current social cultural forces were stronger than religious impulses as instigators of change and adaptation in broader society. If religious groups choose not to learn from the lessons of the pandemic about cultural adaptation and change, culture will not hesitate to leave religious institutions behind.

# RESOURCES

The following are helpful resources for churches and religious leaders to explore on these topics.

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**Shepherding My Church - Building community for people who want more**

<https://www.shepherdingmychurch.com/>

**Disruptive Dialogues on the Future of Religion Podcast**

<https://anchor.fm/disruptivedialogues>

**The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online (eBook)**

<https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/handle/1969.1/187891>

**Religion in Quarantine: The Future of Religion in a Post-Pandemic World (eBook)**

<https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/handle/1969.1/188004>

**Digital Ecclesiology: A Global Conversation (eBook)**

<https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/handle/1969.1/188698>