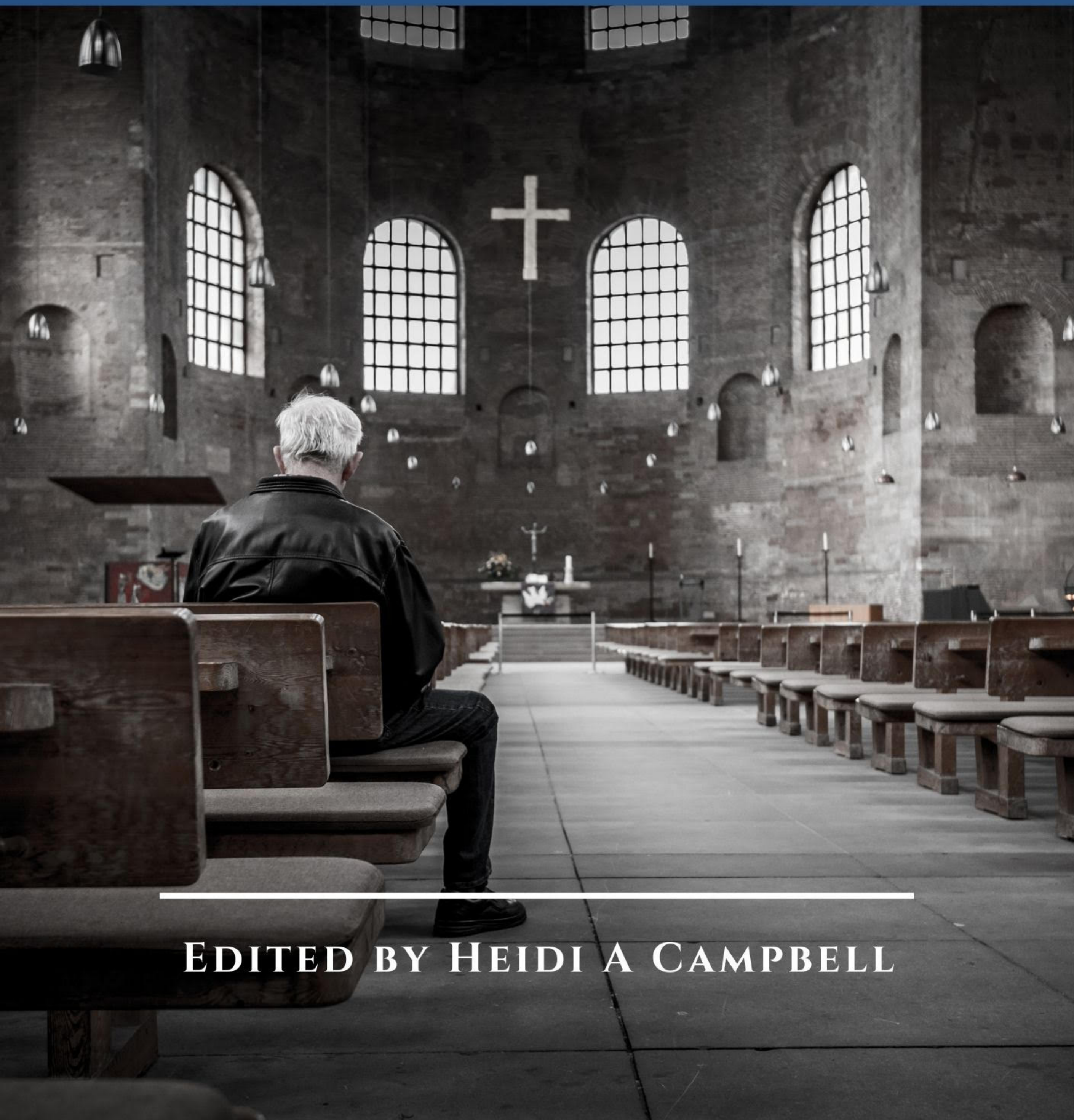# REVISITING THE DISTANCED CHURCH

EDITED BY HEIDI A CAMPBELL

Revisiting the Distanced Church
Edited by Heidi A Campbell
Editorial Assistance by Sophia Osteen
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Revisiting
The Distanced Church

Heidi A Campbell, editor

Revisiting the Distanced Church
Table of Contents

Part 2: Scholars Observations of Patterns and Trends Found in Churches Technology Engagement

Introduction: Returning the Distanced Church and Considering the Technological Road Taken

Heidi A Campbell

It is hard to believe that we are over a year into the pandemic and never would I have imagined we would enter a second year of lockdowns and masking. While things look promising here in the United States as we move towards 50% rate of vaccinations in our population, in many parts of the world, the global pandemic is still a challenging reality. For those who work in the church, it has been an especially up and down journey. Church leaders have had to navigate the transition to digitally mediated worship services, negotiate social distancing policies, and try to care for their congregations in a time of increasing uncertainty. Church members have had to adapt to technologically-mediated meetings, navigate feelings of isolation and loneliness to find community through new forms of connection, and try to imagine what mission in a disconnected yet networked digital time could look like.

In April 2020, I edited and published my first eBook, *The Distanced Church* (see: https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/handle/1969.1/187891), with the goal of documenting the changes and technological decision-making that religious leaders were having to undergo as they swiftly moved their services online during the first lockdown of the pandemic. In five short weeks, from email invitations in March to a publication in late April of 2020, the eBook brought together 30 pastors, leaders, and religion and media scholars from different parts of the world. Together, the collection allowed contributors to share their personal responses to the pandemic and reflect on how their lives and work were being impacted by the then new health and safety restrictions that were reshaping our social and even religious lives.

Since then, *The Distanced Church* has been downloaded over 22,000 times. In terms of sheer numbers and interactions, the eBook has had the single largest public impact of any of publication I have written to date. The issues raised, how congregations can and should engage with technology along with the broader implications of these choices, struck a chord with many. It led to many emails in my inbox and comments and questions on my social media streams regarding these issues. This also resulted in multiple invitations to speak, online via Zoom of course, with different church and denominational groups from all over the world about my research on digital religion.

I was humbled to be able to talk with Mennonite pastors in the West Indies and Church Planters in Korea about digital ministry strategies, and the long term ministry implications of short term technology choices with Methodist pastors on the East Coast of America and Seventh Day Adventist leaders on the West Coast.

The Distanced Church also caught the attention of theologians and those in the academic study of religious community. The eBook was reviewed by several theology journals and denominational publications, showing that it not only offers practical advice, but also speaks to larger theological issues in need of further exploration about what role technology can and will need to play in a post-pandemic church reality. I had no idea that my desire to bring leaders and scholars together in a virtual conversation in this way would have such a strong effect on discussion of digital theology during the season of COVID-19 virus or the way it would resonate with so many religious leaders during the pandemic.

A year later, we are still on a journey that requires churches to consider carefully the ways that faith communities should be engaged through technology. The implications a year of restructured and mediated forms of meeting will have of the future of the church is still to be seen. Because of this, and the many other challenges of those who study and serve the church have had to navigate over the past year, I felt it was time to pause and reflect on this journey. A year after the publication of The Distanced Church, I invited all the original contributors to respond to their initial essays, and consider how their thinking about the church and technology may have changed or developed during the pandemic, and what they have learned about digital church ministry. Thirteen of the original 30 authors answered this call. I also invited several groups of church leaders to whom I have spoken to about themes in the original eBook to be part of this a project. Six individuals took up this invitation to select and respond to a specific essays which they found especially helpful in developing their own digital ministry in 2020. These nineteen essays make up this new eBook, Revisiting the Distanced Church.

Revisiting the Distanced Church is not just a follow-up conversation about the "then and now" of what church work looks like during the pandemic, or how pastors and scholar see the evolving relationship between the church and digital media. As I have read the heart-felt narratives of our contributors, I noticed three prominent themes emerging from their reflections.

First, they share very personal stories with high levels of transparency. The essays border on brutal honesty regarding the cost of the pandemic on their lives and ministries. The adrenalin rush of problem-solving social distancing and the anxious excitement of the forced online migration of worship services in spring 2020 is long gone. Pastors are weary from constant problem-solving of pandemic-pushed changes to church practice. Church leaders are overwhelmed with managing the expectation of different populations in their congregation, both those who resisted the technology transition and called for a quick return to offline worship and digital natives who felt churches lacked creativity and interactivity in their online offerings. Amidst sharing their interest in exploring what the church's new relationship with technology should be post-pandemic, there is a tone of frustration, exhaustion, and in some cases, disillusionment with the culture that the church has created. The reality is many religious leaders are, or are on the edge of burnout. We need to acknowledge the many ministry successes that have been hard won this past year, as well as give grace for the failure when pandemic ministry did not meet people's need or expectations. Discussion in digital theology need to keep this in mind and consider ways technology can be used to care for and encourage pastors at this time.

This leads to a second theme: many describe the pandemic as being somewhere between a wake-up call and an epiphany for the church. In the eBook What Should Post-Pandemic Religion Look Like? (see: https://doi.org/10.21423/postpandemicreligion), my husband and I argue that "...online worship services spotlight what religious groups actually see as their core beliefs and defining practices" (2021, 14). As church leaders sought to transfer the weekly service online in early 2020, they were confronted with the revelation about what their congregation truly valued about church from members' comments of they felt were most lacking in worship online. Debates about the limitations of online Communion revealed deeply held theological beliefs and tensions about that church practices. The critiques on those services which were livestreamed or videoed highlighted pastoral performance expectations from church members. Frustrations voiced about the lack of community they found online spotlights that for some members, it was the fellowship shared during the church coffee hour that was more missed than the services themselves. For as much work that went into transferring the service online, it was also revealed that religious practice was centered on the event of public worship and the space of the church. For the first time, many realized that church is about offering a single experience that is placed-based for its members, a reality that challenged many deeper theological teachings about the nature of the church.

Thus, for many of our authors, the church's navigation of technology and the pandemic itself, became an eye-opening experience. It drew their attention to trends and beliefs within the church in new ways, revealing both positives and negatives about the state of the church.

Third, and finally, the essays revealed a general agreement that post-pandemic, there was no going back to the exact same life and practice of the pre-pandemic church. Many inferred or directly stated that the church had to adapt to a new normal. The pandemic had introduced new external factors for the church; from the new technologies supporting various areas of church work to governmental or social policies influencing health and safety standards to which churches have to abide. There was also a sense that time spent investing in new forms of congregational worship and ministry that were seen as successful by leaders should be honored and those practices time and resources investments should be continued in some way post-pandemic. Thus, for many technology-enhanced or supported ministry whether that be by continuing online small group options or livestreaming services, it is here to stay. For contributors, advantages offered by select forms digital media work in the church outweigh the perceived risks or threats previously raised about such engagement.

The issue of the digital divide within many churches and communities was made highly visible during the pandemic, with pastors having to brainstorm even more alternatives for connecting and caring for their congregations. This showed church leaders that the digital have and have nots, those who opt in or opt out of technology, are all impacted by the digital transition of the church and the rise of digital culture. This means that the church must consider issues of information and technological accessibility when developing mediatized religious practice. These, and many other issues raised, point to a need for further reflection and adaptation by the church to the "new" social and technology-driven reality revealed during the pandemic.

Overall, Revisiting the Distanced Church provides a unique look into how the COVID-19 pandemic has shaped the practices of the church over the past year, how leaders and scholars are reflecting on the present-future of digital ministry, and the areas in which further reflection and healing may need to take place in the days to come.

Resources

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Part 1: Pastoral Reflections on Using Technology during the Pandemic

#1

Imagining a New World - Reflections on Ministry After a Year of the Pandemic

Bryony Taylor

This essay explores the experience of a priest in the UK grappling with ministry online looking at the three themes of grief (what we have lost), awareness (what we are able to still do) and blessing (the new connections we are making) and adding a fourth theme of imagination after a year of living with the pandemic.

In my first essay for the eBook *The Distanced Church,* I took the three themes of grief, awareness, and blessing to reflect on the initial experience of ministering in the first pandemic lockdown of March 2020. After a year of operating in new and constantly changing ways, I will again use these three themes to reflect on a year of "hybrid" church.

Grief – what have we lost?

To put it simply, our greatest loss (apart from the loss of life) in this pandemic year has been togetherness. In speaking to parishioners, the thing they have missed the most is simple human interaction. A chat over a cup of tea, a warm hug, a catch up on gossip. People have missed being in the same room at the same time and sharing an experience – be it singing, praying, or lamenting together. In 2020, we experienced the deaths of some key people in our congregations – a retired priest and an organist. Not being able to grieve their loss corporately has been very difficult. This loss of togetherness cannot be overcome by using digital technology – it can be slightly mitigated, but only as a painkiller rather than a cure.

We have collectively experienced trauma in this last year. Virtually all of us know someone who has died of COVID-19.

Rowan Williams (2009) once said "...the church is still a place where people have got the emotions that won't go anywhere else." I feel this is still true. The challenge as we emerge from the pandemic is to process those emotions in a safe way, both online and offline. As parishioners, we need to do this but we also need to hold out a framework for those who are not believers with which to interpret what has happened to us, one that offers Christian hope.

We need to respond to such comments as this honest statement by the journalist John Harris in The Guardian (2021):

> Like millions of other faithless people, I have not even the flimsiest of narratives to project on to what has happened, nor any real vocabulary with which to talk about the profundities of life and death. Beyond a handful of close friends and colleagues and my immediate family, there has been no community of like minds with whom I have talked about how I am feeling or ritualistically marked the passing of all these grinding weeks and months.

This is a huge challenge, and one which will require great imagination and creativity to meet.

Awareness – what can we still do, what resources do we have available to us to adapt?

One thing we have learned is that we all have an amazing ability to adapt. We have made rapid changes to the ways in which we interact with one another and in a traditional setting like a Parish Church, this has felt almost miraculous. People have learned how to set up their smart TVs to watch our church services in their living rooms, how to use Zoom to join in bible study groups, and how to make audio recordings so that they can send in their readings or prayers for inclusion in online services.

A good outcome of this pandemic year has been that from now on, our services will be livestreamed by default and our phone services (using telephone conferencing) will also continue indefinitely. This will enable anyone who cannot attend a service for whatever reason to always have a way to engage.

I argued in my first essay that online worship should be creative and do what cannot be done in a church building. As the year has gone on, unfortunately, this creative burst has waned somewhat and online services have reverted a little to look more like a service in church. Interestingly, this is a result of having learned how to use technology, such as Open Broadcast Software, to broadcast my Sunday services live, rather than using pre-recorded videos. As we emerge from the pandemic, our services in church will simply be livestreamed (i.e., a camera will be pointed at the minister for the duration of the service). This is not the same as the online worship we offered during lockdown which was designed specifically for those watching from home.

The new challenge is what to do for those who have only ever engaged in our online worship once we are fully back to worship in our buildings.

There are some services which I feel lend themselves more readily to online than offline. I observed this at All Souls when we commemorate the dead. For many, this bereavement service can be difficult. People attending may be in church for the first time since the funeral of their loved one. Attendees may also be unfamiliar with church services and unsure where to sit and stand. I devised a special, live, online service for All Souls on Facebook. Afterwards, I noticed one attendee shared an image of her set-up at home. She watched the service on her TV and had lit a candle next to an image of her late husband. She was in a safe space to engage with this moving service. I have decided that from now on, there will always be an online option for All Souls (in addition to the in-church service).

Blessing – what new blessings have we experienced during this period?
For some members of our churches, the greatest blessing has been openness to change. We have each discovered that we are capable of changing and adapting and doing so quite quickly. I have begun to explore with my parishes changing our pattern of services – the service times and styles of service. This is usually one of the most stressful things one can go about doing in an established traditional church. However, because the pandemic has forced us all to change, people are less reluctant to try something new. After presenting a new proposal for our pattern of worship, one parishioner said: "let's go for it, what have we got to lose?"

In the wider community, there are the twin blessings of greater visibility and engagement of people who would not normally attend church. This has come about because of our activity online. I wrote in my essay last year: "People are dipping their toes into worship because of our ready availability in their pocket or on the laptop in front of them" (Campbell, 43, 2020). We now have some regular attendees of our online worship. Interestingly, these people have not attended a service in person yet – perhaps they will not? I was particularly struck by one person commenting "another great sermon Bryony" on a Facebook service video – implying this person had been to more than one online service. This was from someone that I know in the community but who never attends services usually.

We have also gained greater visibility in the community purely from regularly broadcasting on our Facebook page and YouTube channel. People are more aware of the church and that it is "living and active" than they were before when all they would usually see was a locked medieval building in their village. People recognize me even more when I am out. One woman stopped me to thank me for a school assembly video I had created (a religious instruction video about spirituality). She had watched the video with her daughter and told me they were still listing positive things from the day before bedtime.

Before the pandemic, my school visits were only observed by staff and the children, the video assemblies gave tools to parents to talk to their children about spirituality. The pandemic has enabled people to be more flexible and more open to the new which creates very good conditions for mission.

Conclusion - imagination

I would like to add a fourth focus after considering the same three areas that I introduced in my first essay. The word is: "imagination." There were one or two parishioners who did not respond to my offers of online or phone church. Some of these people had internet access and a telephone but they did not engage. I would hypothesize that this was out of a lack of imagination. These people found it impossible to imagine doing church in a different way – whether over the telephone or online. Not being able to show them (face to face) also created a barrier.

It reminded me of an encounter I had with an elderly gentleman on the bus who saw me reading a book on an e-Reader. When he asked what it was, I tried to explain that I had a collection of books on the device and that I was reading one of them. He replied: "how did it get on there?" It was almost impossible to explain to someone with no knowledge of the internet what my e-Reader was. Those who did not engage with our worship through lockdown were in a similar position – they had no experience of online or phone church and therefore could not imagine it might be for them. Both the lack of imagination on the part of these people and the lack of opportunity to demonstrate how it worked meant that these people missed out on church through the lockdown.

Our greatest task as church leaders is to "redescribe reality" (as Walter Bruggemann says of preaching) and enable people to imagine a new way of doing things and that a new world is possible. At the Eucharist, we declare the Sursum Corda – "Lift up your hearts" – this is nothing less than using our imaginations to see the new thing that the Lord is doing.

In this last year, we have experienced a tremendous amount of change. The challenge will be to harness the good and build on the new relationships formed as we become a "hybrid" church, using all the resources, online and offline that are available with as much imagination as we can muster.

Bryony Taylor is Rector of Barlborough and Clowne in Derby Diocese, United Kingdom. Before ordination in 2014, Bryony worked in the field of learning technology and as a social media consultant. She is now a Rector of two small Church of England parishes in Derbyshire in the United Kingdom – former mining communities whose congregations are largely made up of people over the age of 65.

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#2

The Unspectacular Pastor: Drawn and Quartered. Reflecting On My Own Reflection

Stephen Evoy

This essay provides an honest look into the challenging realities of pastoral life and ministry over the pandemic, especially for those in small local churches whose work is bi-vocational.

The Unspectacular Pastor: Live and in Person, my contribution to *The Distanced Church*, shares the important lesson I learned during a stressful weekend: trying to produce the "best" service is not the best way to move your ministry online. My anecdotal account of those few crazy days was written during the (mostly) quiet months between March 13 and June 14, 2020. Our church building was officially closed those three months. I was there nearly every day, reading, writing, thinking, praying, puttering, recording virtual Sunday services, and posting those unspectacular "Fireside Chats." When we reopened, folks were invited to "join us in person or online," the latter option was the live and pathetic high angle view from the far, back corner of the sanctuary.

In August, a personal dream came true: I was offered the full-time position of an 8-12 grade English teacher in our local school. I'd been preparing for that opportunity – with the blessing of my church board and support of my congregation – for several years. I thought that my modest attempts to do church online had prepared me for the extravagant complexity of providing "hybrid education" to our students. They had not. It was a new experience for every teacher in our middle and high school. As we approach the end of our first year of Zooming from our rooms, we're still learning how to teach our students in person and online at the same time. It's not easy. None of this has been easy. The title of this essay describes the visceral anguish I choose to endure while investing the time and effort required to maintain helping relationships on four separate fronts: preaching in my church, pastoring online, teaching in my classroom, and tutoring online. The subtitle describes the personal shock I experienced when I recently re-viewed my original "Fireside Chat #1." The important lesson that I hope to share in this chapter is: suffering is the path to true survival. I write as a full-time pastor addressing an audience of fellow church leaders. I am also a full-time teacher, so I expect everyone to pay attention.

On March 13, 2020 (a Friday, no less!), our Governor issued an executive order temporarily closing Michigan's K-12 schools. Later in the day, my Superintendent sent out a directive instructing the Free Methodist churches in the East Michigan Conference to immediately suspend all in-person activities. I had twenty years' experience in full-time pastoral ministry before the Pandemic arrived in Michigan, during which I had never livestreamed a thing. Without any warning, I was abruptly forced to find a way to get from my pulpit in the sanctuary to a platform in cyberspace. I was overwhelmed by the question: *How am I supposed to do that – in less than 48 hours?* I uploaded my answer on Monday, March 15. The short video, *Fireside Chat #1: A Personal Message from Pastor Steve* can still be viewed on our church Facebook page. I engage with the question, "Are we living in hard times?"

On April 2, 2020, our Governor upgraded Michigan's three-week shutdown to an indefinite lockdown. Citizens were ordered to "Stay Home. Stay Safe." My chapter for The Distanced Church was written in the first weeks of what turned out to be a three-month closure of our facilities. I don't recall many specific days from that season. The main thing that I remember is how similar they were. I went to the church every morning around 9am, after my two daughters had logged in to their first hour Zoom classes and my wife had settled in at the remote workstation we'd set up in our bedroom. Day after day, I was all alone in the church. I had the whole place to myself. It was an ideal place to think and an opportune time to write.

I am in a different place today. There is little time to write. I have worked on this chapter in fits, starts, and quits. It's been a frustrating labor of stuttering and sputtering. Writing is next to impossible when you're being drawn and quartered.

I will elaborate with a less gruesome (but over-used) word picture: I feel lost in vast ocean. I imagine that many readers can easily relate to that image. I haven't seen land since I set sail as a teacher in this little school. My dream came true in the middle of a living nightmare. I doubled down, with no idea how anything would turn out. I expected bad winds, rough seas, and a rogue wave or two. I never imagined it would be this *hard*.

I felt shipshape when I set out. After nine months being thrown about by perfect storms of circumstances, situations, and uncertainties, I'm struggling to stay afloat. The days are mountainous waves. They seem to be growing larger. I am becoming weaker. When I lay my body down at the end of one day, I feel the next one swelling up beneath me.

Who *knew* that preaching and teaching were more different than alike? (Answer: everyone but me, before I set out on this adventure. I'm one of those people who has to learn things the hard way.) Livestream preaching and hybrid teaching have even less in common. They are both difficult, in different ways.

I don't regret my decision. I will not resign from either post. I will survive. I will remain.

Before I started doing both, I kidded around saying things like, "Pastoring and teaching will fit neatly together – just like a rock and a hard place." (They *do*, and it's no joke.) The stress of pastoring and the stress of teaching do not combine by addition, but by exponential multiplication. I had a rough day in the classroom yesterday. After school, I filled in as manager for a basketball game. I was home by 9:30 pm, anticipating some downtime with my daughters before I tucked them in. At 9:47 pm, I received this text message: "I need to talk to someone. I am struggling to find a reason to be." The text wasn't sent by a church parishioner or a school parent or student. It was a distress signal from a person whose ship was going down.

There are many people in my congregation, my classroom, and my community who are in harder situations and worse shape than I am. That burden of knowledge is heavy cargo in my mind. It functions like ballast, the weight below the water that ships need to stay upright in bad seas. I've lost direction, so I'm navigating by needs. You could say that helping others to survive is one of my reasons to be.

A revisit to The Unspectacular Pastor would not be complete without a review of those early Fireside Chats which proved to be so popular in my community. I believe they were referenced as "the fireside chat model" in *The Distanced Church*. I recently re-watched the pilot episode: "Fireside Chat #1." I was amazed and alarmed at how much younger I seemed to look just one year ago. I set up a little experiment to explore the question: Had I really aged, or was I just feeling old?

I showed a screenshot of *The Unspectacular Pastor* himself to my students and asked them to guess when it was taken. The answers ranged from five to ten years ago. When I told them the truth, the middle schoolers thought it was funny. The seniors were concerned.

Several spoke up, sounding worried as they told me:

"Mr. Evoy, you need to get out of this place. It's not good for your health."

"Where do you think I should I go?"

"Anywhere but here! You've been all over the world. Where do you want to be?"

"You're right," I agreed.

I *have* been all over the world. Seven of my fifty-two years have been lived beyond the borders of the United States. The seniors know much of my story. "You know about the places I've been, the people I've known, the things I've seen and done. My life has been an amazing journey up to this point. I've haven't seen or done it all, but I've seen and done enough to know that this is where I belong, and this is what I supposed to be doing. I am sticking around, confident that the best is yet to come."

No one seemed to be convinced.

Somebody blurted, "Mr. Evoy, how long do you think you can survive in this situation? I mean: *look at the picture and look in a mirror!*"

(She did have a point.)

"Define survival. Anyone. Don't raise your hands. Just give me a definition."

A young man said, "*Simple. Survival means being the last one standing.*"

I smiled and slowly shook my head. "When I was your age, I would not have been able to give such a succinct response in so little time. I understand exactly what you mean. I'm not trying to mock you, but I must say that I couldn't disagree with you more."

I waited, allowing their confusion and curiosity to expand before I continued. "If I am the last one standing, then I'm dead on my feet. That definition of survival is a recipe for extinction. I am old, and I am tired, but I am wise. I am learning that living – *really living* – means pouring out myself into others. Now, I get what you're saying. I share your concern: the 'before and after' pictures of this school year suggest that I may be spilling a lot more than I am pouring. I hope to improve with practice because I plan to stick around. I do believe that some of the things I have tried to teach you have stuck in your mind. I can see in your eyes that what I'm telling you now is going straight into your hearts. That makes me happy. I love teaching because I *love* you! When I come to the end of my road, I hope my tank is completely empty. If you hear about it, don't be sad for long. Remember that it is my delight to give each and every one of you a little piece of myself.

And believe when I tell you that I am honored by your willingness to receive what I have to offer. Pouring myself out – into you – *that's* my long-term plan of survival."

I could tell by their expressions that my words hit the mark.

> You may be feeling drawn and quartered.
> You may be frightened by your own reflection.
> You may be lost at sea, or going down with your ship.

In Fireside Chat #1 I reflected on the question, "Are we living in hard times?" Back then, I wasn't sure. All I could say was, "Wait and see, friends. Time will tell."

> We have waited. Time has told us. So, I'll say it: we are living in hard times.
> Let me also say this: *suffering is the path to true survival.*

(And let me spit this out while I'm at it: People peddling pedantic clichés like, "It's about thriving, not surviving – because surviving isn't enough," have never been in real situations where their actual survival was truly at stake. That's cheap talk in a Pandemic. Don't buy it!)

Sometimes, friends, survival is enough. And suffering is the path to true survival.

This messy essay was written in hard times. Writing is hard (for me) in good times; it's extra-difficult in hard times. Putting these words together has been personally painful because I really am falling apart. It's been worth it. For one thing, the challenge of this chapter has helped me empathize more deeply with my English students. They so were relieved when I confessed how I was struggling with a writing assignment!

I poured myself out through this unspectacular piece of writing. These words are a little piece of my mind. The labor of love required to set them in order is a little piece of my heart. I probably spilled more than I poured (seems to be happening a lot during these hard times), but I remain hopeful that these words will hit the mark in the lives of readers who need to be reminded and reassured that *suffering is the path to true survival.*

Rev. Steve Evoy has served in the Free Methodist Church over 25 years in a variety of roles. As an FM volunteer, he was an English teacher and foreign language student in Asia. He partnered with national leaders to develop education-based intervention programs to support highly at-risk children in creative-access regions of the Himalaya. He has a BA in Family Life Education and an MA in Education from Spring Arbor University. Steve lives in Wolverine, MI; he's in his eighteenth year of pastoring the Wolverine Free Methodist and his first year teaching 8-12 English Language Arts in Wolverine Community Schools. He is also State certified in Speech, School Counseling, and Special Education.

#3

Reflections on Doing Church Ministry Online and AFK (Away from Keyboard) During the Pandemic

David Silverkors

This follow-up essay on last year's reflections on learnt lessons is focusing on trust building and the problem of being present when you're not physically there.

"I don't have Facebook."
– Parish member one year ago, when we tried to explain they didn't need to have an account on Facebook to view the livestreams.

Today, most people have solutions in place to meet digitally; with Zoom, Teams, iMessage, Hangouts, WhatsApp, Signal, or some other way. The question on whether to be online or not is a non-question and being online demands no justification. That is one of the most fundamental changes over the last year. In last year's essay, I began to see this trend. Now, I can see that this is something natural and obvious.

So, now when meeting and socializing online is a given, what challenges do we have today and how do they relate to the lessons I drew last year?

I will not, however, interact with last year's lesson from historical practices, with my example from spiritual communion. That is because we didn't have to stop celebrating communion until very late in the year, from Lent. And started celebrating it again this year from Palm Sunday. We have during the whole duration of that time, as well as before and after, been able to offer communion in private, within our ministry of pastoral care. This meant that the need to emphasize spiritual communion haven't been very clear.

What is the proper distinction between IRL and AFK?
To help us investigate this last year, I believe that we need to make a few distinctions and define some terms. What happens in the "physical" that does not happen when we meet up in the digital?

We need to define the difference between IRL ("In Real Life") and AFK ("Away From Keyboard"). IRL tends to assume that real life is what happens when you meet up in person and it is not as real when you meet online. But AFK, on the other hand, just makes a distinction between if you are behind the keyboard or not. It does not make any difference in value between meeting online or in person.

If we make a scale where those two terms are placed at respective ends, it stands rather clear that much of the Church of Sweden's activities had both feet firmly placed in the end that only views the meeting in person as real (IRL). But a change during the last year can be noted to also acknowledge digital meetings as real.

To help us further, I would like to use a few terms from John Suler's research on "The Psychology of Cyberspace" (http://users.rider.edu/~suler/psycyber/psycyber.html). First, there are two terms describing basic features of cyberspace I would like to mention:

> · Reduced sensations – the term Suler use to describe the limits in social interaction that digital means so far imposes on us.
> · Recordability – Suler use this term to refer to how easy it usually is to record and save interactions online. For both good and bad uses.

I would also like to mention the online disinhibition effect which John Suler introduces the following way: "It's well known that people say and do things in cyberspace that they wouldn't ordinarily say or do in the face-to-face world" (http://users.rider.edu/~suler/psycyber/disinhibit.html). He continues by describing several factors that come into play to create this effect, I will mention two:

> · You Can't See Me (invisibility) – Suler describes this factor as similar to anonymity but not the same, since your name can be seen in for example a Teams-meeting, but you can turn off the camera. You do not have to worry about how you look or sound when this factor is in effect.
> · We're Equals (minimizing authority) – Suler describes this minimizing of authority as the leveling of the playing field for communication. For example, as a participant, you can turn off or lower the volume significantly to minimize the impact of what the person of higher rank says.

A lesson in trust: Confirmation class

Last autumn, we were so happy that over 50 youth registered for a confirmation class group that will visit London, by this we double the total number of confirmands compared with the last two years. But when we started their year, we could not meet in person for the first classes. We met over Zoom, with youth who already are used to being online and everything social media can mean of both possibilities as well as threats.

The most tangible and strange experience, at first, was how difficult it was to get the youth to show their faces during the Zoom classes. They turned their webcams off all the time and were not visible for more time than was absolutely necessary. Why did this happen? We realized after a while that it probably was because they are well aware of how easy it is to screenshot or record our meetings and use pictures/video clips to make fun of each other outside of class. The limits to this kind of behavior that an AFK meeting with the class provides, cannot be guaranteed to the same extent online. Regardless of how well encrypted the connection is. This comes down to the question of trust: how do we build trust in a group of teenagers who haven't already met AFK? The relationships they had with each other and to the extent they already knew each other, was not from parish life but from school, sports practice, and other contexts. We, as leaders, were unknown but both the possibilities and the threats the others in the groups posed was already clear to them. These questions are not exclusive to online groups but are also relevant to groups who start AFK, but those usually do different exercises and games to build trust within the group. We usually have a cellphone "kindergarten," which means that no pictures get taken or videos shot. What happens in confirmation class will not end up on TikTok, Snapchat, or Instagram the next day.

The recordability of the digital gatherings was clearly viewed and handled as potentially threatening situations that the youth needed to guard themselves from. And they may even be right! We did not personally know the other youths in the gathering and had no way to know or control the Zoom-meeting to make sure that no screenshots were taken, or recordings saved.

The contrast was noticeable between the confirmation classes that already had the opportunity to meet up in person in November before the restrictions in Sweden got tougher. They had already built relationships by meeting AFK in person.

his did not mean those groups switched over to fully digital gatherings without pain but I gather that the "reduced sensation" that digital gatherings usually mean have had less of a destructive impact on the groups that met AFK before going digital.

How do we build relationships and trust in an online group that have not first met in person AFK?
One possibility in future online-based groups is, for example, going on camp early or for a few AFK-gatherings beforehand so that the groups build relationship and trust. That can be transferred to the digital gatherings, in a well thought out manner. To be able to skip on the AFK parts in groups and still get to the same level of trust is far beyond what today's technology can give us, I'm afraid.

But on our way to that future day, we in the church needs to wrestle with these questions on how we can invite to authentic relationships in the parish, that won't instead help limit people into a cold version of individualism where spirituality is also something private that happens on the screen. Where the opportunity to build trust and relationships is more limited or at least is a lot slower than meeting up AFK.

To build a spiritual community online or in person takes trust, without trust we are not going to become much of a community. So, how do we meet this challenge?

The difficulty on being there, when you're not
I have in several different contexts noted the difficulty for some to take part in meetings and events online, because it is not experienced the same way. One example is when someone puts their cellphone in their pocket during the digital staff meeting, and the coworker only listens half-heartedly while doing something else. Instead of taking a seat, being visible to others, and being an active part of the meeting. Another one is not being able to take part in the service online because it does not feel authentic, where one is feeling like they are viewing it from a distance and not a part of the service.

This is where the invisibility factor (or "You Can't See Me" as Suler puts it) comes into play and reinforces the online disinhibition effect together with the minimizing of authority. There does not have to be any lesser motives involved for this to happen, just that what work or task you have in front of you is more compelling or feels more acute than whatever is said or happens on the screen. Or what is said does not seem to apply to you, since you are "so far" away from the speaker and that context.

It is very hard to build spiritual communities when people feel like they have been left outside, how do bridge this gap in perception?

Distance and loneliness
There is a joke about distance and the pandemic, and it goes like this: We look forward to when the pandemic is over, so we Swedes can be relieved from the mandatory social distancing of two meters (about six and half feet) between us and go back to our normal four meters of distancing when socializing. There is a truth about northern Europeans desiring to have a certain physical distance when we socialize, perhaps not unique even though different cultures vary on this. But this forced distancing makes it hard to be natural in a social setting with others. Simple things like greeting each other when we meet or leave, where we happily shake hands, or hug if we know each other closer are now gone. How do we mediate God's incarnated love to one another in a concrete way when we cannot even touch each other in the most basic manner?

We can here see the disadvantages of the online disinhibition effect for people who already feel lonely because of the pandemic and miss being able to meet up with others AFK because they feel that is how you meet in real life (IRL). Media reports in Sweden have warned against the level of loneliness the pandemic have forced many into, especially elders. I imagine the same or similar situations have been reported in other countries. The effects on the psychological well-being have been disastrous for many, and of course that is not to be blamed on digital media. However, digital media have not been a full replacement for in person meetings, and probably will not become that either in the foreseeable future.

To invite to a digital parish gathering those already lonely to another digital gathering when all they long for is a handshake, a hug, or a pat on the shoulder and some time to meet in person, is just not enough. How do we overcome this problem in parish life?

Closing thoughts
Hopefully, the vaccines and even more effective treatment will mean that our societies will open sooner rather than later, and will remove some very important obstacles to meeting AFK and also for combining parish life between digital solutions and AFK gatherings. But given the current situation, I think there is value in pondering how we can overcome the obstacles I have accounted for above.

I think part of the solution to many of the problems above are, of course, both social and technical. Here, I will focus on two mainly social factors that may seem basic but still aren't fully resolved.

Growing knowledge on how to use and express oneself in digital media

As more and more people grow accustomed to using different platforms and apps, the threshold to connect socially and create as well as maintain meaningful relationships lowers. This is crucial in enabling those who are lonely to feel more included and part of the community. Here, the church can play a part in teaching people how to use these solutions as well as buying advice for new or finding used devices.

Becoming more accustomed to a digital way of representing oneself and connecting socially with others

When more people get used to talking and socializing digitally, the barrier between "real" meetings in person and the perceived distance digital meetings create will become smaller. As people learn how to represent themselves online and open themselves up to others, the feeling of distance will probably be less harsh. It will become easier to build trusting relationships. This is also something that the parish can help with by providing safe digital social gatherings where people can meet up and practice their online presence and skills in being themselves digitally.

David Silverkors was ordained in 2008. He has been a parish priest mainly in Uppsala diocese in Church of Sweden and currently serves a vicar of Håbo pastorat in Church of Sweden. His main focus during the first ten years as a minister has been youth work and online presence. Now he, as vicar, is trying to find good ways of being church online.

#4

A Church that Serves Together, Stays Together
Zach W. Lambert

> *As the pandemic wore on, we were able to stem the tide of digital disconnection by leaning into our church's core value of partnering with the community to serve those in need.*

As far as I know, we were the first church in Austin, Texas to publicly announce the cancellation of our Sunday gatherings due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It was Thursday morning, March 12th, 2020 and I had just gotten off of a call with City of Austin safety leaders when we made the call to cancel. It wasn't an easy decision, but our team was united in our belief that it was the right thing to do and the best way to love our neighbors.

The month after we decided to cancel in-person gatherings was a blur as our church family jumped into digital spaces with gusto. In my first article for The Distanced Church eBook (2020), I reflected on the first few weeks of online-only gatherings by saying:

The first Sunday, we had over 200 comments during the live-stream. The second Sunday, over 400 comments... We learned that every single one of our [small] groups reported higher attendance and increased engagement than was happening before coronavirus. More than half of the groups reported that not a single group member had been absent in the three weeks since moving to zoom.

I wish I could say those numbers have continued to soar, but online engagement has waned significantly in the year since then. Most weeks, we have 50-75 comments on our livestream and many of our small groups are struggling with zoom fatigue.

Digital Disengagement
This digital disengagement was widespread in churches across the country, and it was all that any of my pastor friends could talk about. *"How do we get more people to watch more services for more minutes?"* was a common question being wrestled with.

Many of the leaders I knew chose to double-down on the production value of their online gatherings, others invested heavily in audio, visual, and lighting equipment to enhance their stream, and some even decided to stage small audiences to interact with the worship and sermon on screen in hopes that they would be a model of how those watching at home should engage with the online gathering.

We decided to go a different direction. We believed that, even though some of our numeric measures had gone down, one thing remained the same: people were longing for deep connection and shared mission. We posited that some people were disengaging from our digital gatherings because they no longer felt those longings being met at the same level that as they were at the beginning of the pandemic.

Connection Through Mission

So, our team began to brainstorm this question: *Aside from the online Sunday Gathering and our small groups on zoom, what other COVID-safe spaces (both digital and physical) could we create in order to facilitate deep connection and shared mission?*

One of the areas of our church that has been hit hardest by the pandemic has been our service opportunities with community organizations. These partnerships are more than just a mutually beneficial relationship, partnering with the community is one of our core values at Restore. We mobilize volunteers and funding to support organizations who are helping people in need in our community and around the world. Initially, all of our partnership work was shut down due to the pandemic, but during this brainstorming session our team began to consider how we could reignite this core value in a socially distanced world.

After a few conversations with our staff and leadership team, we decided to leave our online production alone (partially because we felt we had maxed out our return on investment in that area already) and focus our time and resources on reimagining our community partnerships and missional engagement. We believe this shared mission would do two vitally important things simultaneously:

1. Help people in desperate need.
2. Revitalize connections and deepen relationships.

And it worked! Here are just a few of the highlights:

- Give Help and Get Help
    - We decided to make two new landing pages on our website: one for people who needed help and one for people who could offer some help. 40 of our members jumped onto our COVID volunteer team and have been meeting needs ever since. In the first few months, that team was able to serve 70 different people who needed help and met 90% of the requests that came in. We also began a partnership with a local food pantry which has been able to serve about 2500 people so far.
- Financial Support
    - We began to adopt the phrase "when you are generous with us, we can be generous with those in need" and our community responded brilliantly. All told, we have given away more than $50,000 to people in need during the pandemic and an additional $10,000 to folks hurt by the record-setting winter storm we endured in February of 2021.
- Material Goods Collected and Distributed
    - Pre-COVID, we often had collection drives in conjunction with our Sunday Gatherings. We decided to bring those back as drive-thrus for folks living in Greater Austin and as online registries for those farther away. So far, we've been able to collect and distribute...
    - 3806 pairs of socks for people experiencing homelessness, kids in foster care, and youth coming out of prison.
    - 1100 pounds of food for a local food pantry.
    - 20 bins of school supplies.
    - 200 care packages for people experiencing homelessness.
    - 140 surge protectors for a local middle school who didn't have enough outlets for their students to power devices in a socially distanced classroom environment.
- Studio for Churches and Nonprofits
    - Our Production Pastor, Chase Fullerton, had the idea to offer our South Austin studio up to churches and non-profits who needed a place to record and stream. He and his production team even volunteered to staff the studio—all for free! Twelve different organizations lined up to take advantage of his offer in the first month alone and used the studio 40 different times.

People were coming out of the woodwork, both in-person and online, to engage with these mission-driven connection points. We had so much success with our drive-thru initiatives in particular that we began using them for social and spiritual purposes as well. We had one drive-thru event centered around intercessory prayer and others to celebrate holidays like Mother's Day and Father's Day.

Almost without fail, our expectations of people's engagement with each of these initiatives were greatly exceeded. Our church family was rekindling relationships and reconnecting with folks they saw weekly pre-COVID through these shared missions. People began to schedule regular socially distanced playdates, coffee meetings, backyard happy hours, and zoom calls with each other. Deep connection started to sprout as folks interacted during these initiatives and then continued growing organically afterward.

Gatherings as Reunions
Since March of 2020, we have only had two Sunday Gatherings that were not online only—both of them on the football field of a local middle school with all of the COVID safety precautions in place. I had initially expected those to feel like the reunifications of long, lost loved ones you see on television. In my mind's eye, I pictured people running in slow-motion to embrace (or fist-bump because of COVID) someone they hadn't seen or heard from in over a year.

Although, for the most part, our outdoor Sunday Gatherings haven't been like that at all. Instead, they feel family reunions—scheduled times when you come together with people you are already deeply and frequently connected to but may not get to see in person as often as you'd like to. Conversations are being had and relationships are being deepened outside of our church's programming, which causes these outdoor gatherings to be just another stop on their relational journey instead of the primary connection point.

Our gatherings have also become a time to celebrate what God is doing in and through our church family. We give regular updates on each mission initiative we've undertaken and encourage people to continue engaging in them.

Values > Programs
The decision to focus our time and resources on reimagining our community partnerships and missional engagement didn't happen in a vacuum. During our initial brainstorming session and in almost every subsequent meeting, we used our core values to shape our decision-making. I'm convinced that churches need to do a better job of allowing their values to drive their programs. Or, to put it another way, we must begin with the "why" and then develop the "what" and "how."

One of our core values is authenticity. We often say, *"being fake does no one any good and real is better than perfect."* Allowing our value of authentic relationships to drive our programming decisions means that we become less concerned about perfectionism in our production and more concerned with whether or not deep connections are being made.

As I already said, another one of our core values is partnerships. This value mean that we lock arms with each other to support people in need in our community and around the world. When we properly emphasize our call to lock arms (whether literally or digitally) and serve those around us, we become less concerned about the number of people watching our livestream and more concerned about the number of people being helped.

Starting with our core values (authenticity, partnerships, grace, and diversity) removes the temptation to be driven primarily by numbers. Because, when it's all said and done, no one will remember our livestream numbers, no one will remember our group attendance, and no one will remember if our production was perfect, but the deep relationships created and the broken communities restored will have an eternal impact.

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#5

Pandemic as a Time of Discernment: Vocational Reflections in a Digital Space

Joanne Mercer

> *In my earlier essay I explored some of the questions that should be considered when deciding how to engage with community online. This essay will reflect on the vocational implications of that reflection and engagement with the growing online faith communities.*

I am writing this essay in a room full of boxes, in the midst of a major physical move as well as a significant vocational shift. I don't know that I can say with certainty that this move would not have happened if it were not for the pandemic, but I can say that the pandemic provided a unique opportunity and landscape for the discernment that led to it.

I have learned a lot in this past year. When I last wrote, I was just beginning to explore the ways to connect to our parish community using online tools. I was focusing on audio – both phone and online – as an accessible way for most members of my parish community to stay in touch and to worship together. Before long, I was exploring video with the help of my colleagues and partnering with folks around the diocese, across the country and even internationally. This exploration sparked a creativity in me. I began producing videos with clips from a wide variety of people and using a selfie stick to go outside and engage the place that I lived as a backdrop for preaching and teaching. I was invited to be part of online panel discussions and offered bible study online with a colleague from another province. All of these experiences pushed me beyond my comfort zone and reawakened the educator in me.

These online forums were rooted in conversation. Some were small groups and some were live streamed to a larger audience. Hearing people's questions and concerns; helping them formulate their questions to get to what was on their minds; seeing the relief in their faces when they knew they were not alone and not the only person to have such questions and concerns; helped me to recognize my vocation as a theological educator and highlighted the potential and need for reaching out beyond the walls of our theological institutions to meet the needs of the wider community.

I enjoyed exploring new liturgies. Once we were outside of the church building and not physically gathering, I felt liberated and my creativity was reawakened. While many of my colleagues and friends longed for the familiar rituals that mark our worship together, I was invigorated by what might be possible. At the same time, I was frustrated by what I could not do and also that my imagination was unable to keep pace with the changing needs of my community and the fact that the community I was serving no longer had geographical boundaries. But that frustration seemed to feed my desire to learn more and explore more. And it was also draining. So when our churches were able to open again, I was at a crossroads, as I found it impossible to continue to do the creative imaginative liturgical work that fed us spiritually at the height of the pandemic as well as resuming my normal pastoral and liturgical tasks.

I recognize that the local church is in an interesting liminal space right now. It needs to continue to provide care and leadership for those who physically use our buildings and live in our geographical area, while at the same time continuing to nurture the wider community that we have been reaching during this pandemic. But how do we do that? These communities share many similarities but reaching them and ministering to them require very different skill sets and mindsets. As I discussed these new trends with groups online, it became increasingly apparent that the leaders in our churches, both lay and ordained, would need support, training, and pastoral care and direction as they navigate their way in this new time. Things are changing on the ground where we live and so things are going to have to change in our structures and hierarchy in the training that we offer those called to church leadership.

It is in this particular context that I engaged with some very significant vocational questions.

What now?
I have been ordained for over 30 years. I have worked in parishes, community groups, and a theological college. So, what am I called to do now? In so many ways, it is a horrible time to consider moving and beginning something new. I am at the age when many of friends are retiring. There is financial instability all around us. Everything is changing, so how can I intentionally add more stress to an incredibly stressful year? But vocations don't always make sense. Maybe it has actually been the experiences of this year and the changes (and seeing even more changes coming) that made me open to listening to the call to return to my vocation in theological education.

The pandemic has taught us all that we can do more than we ever thought possible. It has taught us to see hope in difficult situations. It has called us to respond to the needs we see with whatever skills and resources we have.

And while this question of "what now?" for me has been mostly a positive and affirming one, I recognize that many other church leaders feel pushed out by all of the change around them. They are questioning their pastoral vocations and how they can live them out in a community whose expectations are radically and quickly changing.

Who am I called to be?

In the past year, I have had many conversations with colleagues as we struggle with the changing nature of our vocation. Am I called to be a priest? A social-media influencer? A videographer? An internet communications director? I have heard many express concern over the fact that they are no longer able to do the tasks that they feel called to do as pastors and priests in their communities. Many do not have an interest or desire to learn how to engage with the new technology. Others are in rural places with little access to equipment or training. It is hard when so much of ministry as we have known it is face to face and involves reaching out and holding someone's hand and now we are praying over the phone, via text or video chat or, if we are lucky, across the room, at an acceptable distance, wearing a mask. The energy you get being together in a physical space is quite different from what you receive online. It is not a simple thing to change from one mode of communication to the other. It requires thought and prayer and discernment. Who am I called to be in this time and place?

I think we need to be honest about the role that our contexts play in our understanding of vocation. An online context or screen-focused context presents both opportunity and redirection. I doubt that many pastors will have a ministry that is solely online and screen-focused, but I do think that it will be very rare to have a ministry that does not include a least some aspect of online presence. We have trained folks to meet pastoral needs in homes, hospitals, in person, and face-to-face because that has long been our predominant identified need. So, how do we develop the skillset needed to provide for the same level of pastoral and spiritual care in an online context? We are back to the biblical questions – who can I send and who will go for me?

Why Not?

The online community has provided me and many others with the space to engage and question things we have long taken for granted. It encourages us to ask, why not? Why can't ministry adapt to these changing needs?

Why can't we join together across denominations or physical distance, and work together on bible studies, worship, and discussion groups? Why not cross boundaries and do something daring? If we have been able to adapt to the changing context before us in this past year, that why not engage other questions with the same creative openness?

I am beginning to follow John Caputo's lead in looking for God's presence in this changing world, and not focusing on what the church alone is doing. Maybe it is time to ask where we see God present in all of this change and dismantling that we have seen. Could some of these changes we see happening be the movement of the Spirit? Church leaders often hover on the edge of change, but this year we have all plunged in...well, maybe we were pushed in. But why not jump in? Why not anticipate that God is present with us in the midst of this deconstruction, encouraging us, and showing us how we may harness this opportunity to become more faithful to the Gospel message? Why not leave a position as Rector of a rural multi-point parish to lead a theological college? Why not indeed!

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#6

There is No Going Back to Normal – Churches in Germany Dealing with the COVID-19 Pandemic
Ralf Peter Rieimann

During the COVID-19 pandemic, congregations had to learn to connect to their members digitally. As digitization encompasses all levels of the church, there are shifts in the relationship between the parish, the church district, and the regional and the national church.

Germany is still in a partial lock-down when this essay was written. The coronavirus pandemic continues and in some places digital services are the only option to worship.

It is too early to make a final assessment but some conclusions can already be drawn. As a result of the pandemic, there was a boost to digitization in the church. Some cheer that the church has finally become digital, while others see a digital church as an emergency solution and long for the status quo ante. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the church and it will not be the same when the pandemic is over. The corona pandemic raises the question of what the church is and what is essential to being church.

Church@Home
"The Church isn't empty. The Church has been deployed" was the title of this book's predecessor and also a theological paradigm to explain the changes due to the pandemic. Church is no longer restricted to the church building but has come to the people's home. People could no longer go to church, so the church had to come to their home. "Church@Home" became a guiding principle. Church@Home is not only a digital church but is also inclusive of people without Internet access. Some parishes offer worship services over the telephone or print out sermons and distribute them to parishioners. Easter@Home was the title of a newspaper supplement distributed to 1.4 million households in the Rhineland area, reaching more than 4 million people. The supplement explained the meaning of Easter and provided a liturgy to celebrate the Lord's Supper at home – without ordained clergy leading the service. Before the pandemic, there were a few academic discussions if a sacrament can be celebrated online but the common point of view was that sacraments are limited to in-person services. This has changed.

Traditionally, the Lord's Supper is celebrated on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday in Protestant German churches. Leading to Easter in 2020, there were various theological discussions whether a digital Holy Communion is adequate. The Church Office of the Evangelical Church in Germany took a critical stand and urged restraint. Nevertheless, communion services were celebrated digitally in Protestant churches in Germany. In 2021 however, congregations offered a digital communion service on Zoom during the Easter week – just like any other digital service. A digital service including Holy Communion has become a normalcy.

Digital worship services during and after the COVID-19 pandemic
The parish pastor Maike Neumann (Neumann, 2020) describes the experiences with digital church services in her parish during the first lockdown as follows: "'Young families say: In digital services we were able to focus on the sermons while the children were playing around us.' Parents of confirmands say: 'We now have breakfast on Sundays as a family while participating in a church service and everyone is happy.' Elderly parishioners say: 'That's good, I often feel too weak to go to church.' And people from all groups say: 'It's so nice that you don't have to dress up and that you can have a coffee in your hand, that you can briefly change a word with your partner, that you can sit on the sofa.... None of this would be possible in a church building … '" There is a lower threshold to participate in digital services – and a new group of people have attended church digitally. The big question is: will this continue after the corona pandemic? The local parish has become digital but will it remain digital after the pandemic?

Many church activities were paused due to restrictions during the pandemic. Worship services became a focal point of church life. A survey among nearly 5000 attendees of digital services showed that most people (more than 80 percent) wish digital services to continue after the pandemic and two thirds plan to attend digital services even if in-person worship services are allowed again (Reimann & Sievert, 2020). Digital services are described as friendly, encouraging, and welcoming, negative adjectives like cool or challenging rank the lowest in the survey. The digital services should not last longer than 30 minutes – this is half of the time of a typical in-person worship service. Most people prefer a mixture of modern songs and traditional hymns. Three fifths want digital services to be live events, about 50 percent want them to be interactive. The younger the participants are, the more they prefer interactive elements in online services (Reimann & Sievert, 2021).

Will in-person service change and follow the preferences for digital services after corona? Will local congregations combine digital and in-person services? Or will they offer separate in-person and digital services?

Televised services are available every Sunday morning on national public television in Germany. During the first lock-down, there were discussions if TV services are sufficient. They offer a worship experience with a higher quality than live-streamed services from local parishes. But, digital church services are in demand because they are local. Proximity, however, is not identical to the boundaries of parish. Cooperation between neighboring parishes can give the local flavor to digital services without every parish live-streaming their service. But online services don't stop at parish boundaries. Some people choose to worship digitally in where they grew up or they follow a pastor who they noticed on the web. If digital services continue after the pandemic they will also challenge the prevalent parish system in Germany.

Digitization is changing Church culture
Church life has changed. The physical presence is very limited again at the moment. Churches have grown digitally in order to keep up a parish life. Not only church service have become digital, but also confirmation classes are digital now, Bible studies are held as video conferences and the church board meets digitally, too. Even more important than the digitization push, however, is that attitudes have changed; congregations have learned to connect to their members and communicate with them digitally.

In most cities and villages, church buildings are landmarks. Everybody knows where the church is located. The church does not have to reach out to people but expects them to know where the church is located. If church life is digital, then the church has to let their members know where they meet. It has to promote the digital meeting places. Thus a digital church has to engage in outreach work in order to be church at all. Without outreach, the digital church will remain empty. This attitude to reach out to members will be necessary and essential for the church after corona. People who have endured economic hardships due to the COVID-19 crisis will question their contributions to the church if they have lost contact to their parish. Congregations will have to show their relevance to their members' lives and thus need to reach out to their members instead of expecting their members to come to church.

Due to the economic difficulties during the pandemic, church taxes – the main income of churches in Germany – are in decline and to stabilize church membership is also an economic necessity for the churches. Thus outreach is not only a theological but also an economic necessity. The Protestant Church in Germany is incorporated as a parish, as a church district, as a regional church and as the Evangelical Church in Germany on the national level. Before COVID-19, only the parish church had direct contact with parishioners.

If church life is organized via video conferences, the national church can offer webinars attended by parishioners from all regions of Germany. Regional Protestant academies offer seminars to church members within a certain region. If the seminars are held digitally, people from all regions of Germany can attend if they are interested in a particular topic or seminar, participation is no longer limited to a certain region. As digitization encompasses all levels of the church, there are shifts in the relationship between the respective levels within the church. New groups have been reached as church life has become digital. However, some loyal church goers who attended church in-person before COVID-19 do not participate digitally. When the pandemic will decrease and and in-person events will resume the key question is: will the church roll back to the status quo ante or will the local church continue to be a digital church?

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#7
Leading Towards a Change in Church Culture
Troy Shepherd

> *When the church is ready to go beyond historical definitions of what religious communities have been, they have the opportunity to embrace innovative changes needed to give their community a reason for hope.*

As I began writing a response to the original article from "The Distanced Church" this April 1, 2021, I realized the irony. While April 1st signifies a holiday for prank-lovers, many around the world are wishing the current reality was simply a practical joke. With emotions overloaded from the long-overdue end to the pandemic that has gripped all of humanity, there is the reality that a new normal is nowhere close to the pre-pandemic normal many were hoping for. Personal exhaustion has led to burnout for many, which is something most of us are just simply tired of enduring.

In my original essay "Is Your Church Ready for Social Distancing?" I argued the necessity for churches to give space and encouragement for more creative experiments about what church could be. The world that existed pre-COVID, is in all reality, much different than our current reality, and pursuing church through a 2019 lens is not just outdated, but also assumes a passive consumption of religion. So, how can the church be a community in a post-social-distanced world?

After a year of pandemic conditions across the world and many cultures making great shifts in how they define community, the church has been struggling to keep pace with what a new reality means for their communities. Leading this charge will take great imagination, patience, and a willingness to fail in order to succeed. But is the church willing to push beyond past definitions of what religious communities have been?

The pandemic is like nothing anyone alive has ever experienced on a global scale. For church leaders, their task has been to mount a response to the current pandemic that leads to calmness, order, and a clear strategy.

This extreme pressure has placed extraordinary demands on leaders that are resulting in a high degree of uncertainty for both them and those around them.

Leaders are facing problems that are not just unfamiliar to them, but also poorly understood by many. Their task is no small burden, to say the least.

For church leaders, the pandemic has caused many of them to rethink how they lead their church in a post-pandemic environment. The question I hear most often from church leaders during this time is, "How can we do something that has never been done before?" Well, it doesn't take a great leader to answer that question, it takes great people, who are willing to lead and have an eagerness to innovate.

While the church has had to adapt to different cultures over its history, in general, it is an institution that has never been synonymous with the idea of innovation. The pandemic was very instrumental in forcing many churches to rely on technology to stay connected to their core group of attendees. The leap in utilizing technology at the beginning of the pandemic, for the most part, was not integrated with much forethought and strategy, rather as a forced initiative. While technology is just the latest hurdle that churches need to innovate around, as well as making sure technology doesn't become the centerpiece of every church meeting, churches should continue considering how technology can help create a communal environment that also aligns with their goals.

Many churches have opted out of innovation altogether. Some have continued to focus on doing the same "spiritual rituals" that have been at their core for centuries past. Others are continuing to produce near reproductions of high-quality concert-style weekly services. While there are many "flavors" or styles of churches in existence, there is one defining goal that seems to remain constant amongst all churches, regardless of pandemic implications. Most all churches have a stated mission that helps define what action is produced by their faith and belief system. That very action is what I would call their "missional commitment."

A missional commitment could be defined as an everyday engagement activity, not just a one hour a week, location-dependent, or highly synthesized communal experience. Due to a continued decline in church attendance over the past couple of decades for most churches worldwide, and a major disruption in attendance due to the pandemic conditions worldwide, churches should consider how their "missional commitment" engages with those whom they are trying to influence. When churches, not just the church leaders, are ready to change their missional approach to align with their stated belief system, the opportunities that exist to advance their mission are nearly countless. As Zig Ziglar, a famous American motivational speaker points out, "The fears we don't face become our limits."

What may have worked a decade ago as a church's "missional commitment" may be less effective today. For example, getting as many people as possible into one location and teaching them is not the only roadmap to a religious mission being successful. During the pandemic, there were countless examples of churches redefining how they engaged with both their attendees and their communities even amid a highly contagious worldwide virus outbreak. While not all innovation was effective during the pandemic, the threat of change is not merely in what practices need attention, but rather in recognizing the opportunity that a shift in emphasis can reveal. How a church's mission is expressed can be the difference between a thriving church and a dying church.

Seeing tomorrow's solutions instead of just today's problems is only the beginning. A strategy that focuses on not just how to translate the offline weekly event into a digital online event will go a long way in how the church engages with its own attendees and those with whom they are trying to influence. In a pre-pandemic Gallop poll, sermons or teachings that help connect faith to one's life were one of the major reasons that participants surveyed chose to be a part of a church. (https://news.gallup.com/poll/208529/sermon-content-appeals-churchgoers.aspx) Post-pandemic conditions will likely elevate this consideration.

Likewise, a post-pandemic church's strategy that concentrates on bridging the activities of the church's mission with the everyday activities of its attendees in their communities most certainly will be engaging. But when the goal is simply to assemble a church, as is the common current institutional infrastructure, rarely will a church's activities spawn into "missional-commitment" strategies.

Strategy, however, does not come without disruption. Most strategies involve change, and with change can come an interruption in a church attendee's preferences or accommodations. Many who are used to a certain structure week in and week out may find it uncomfortable and even confusing to venture into uncharted territory to gain a "missional-commitment" mindset. Without a clear strategy going forward, the improper allocation of resources can reduce effectiveness. So much of the church's current energy is being spent taking care of the very people who are already "restored" and so little energy is focused on those who need to be restored, like the hurting, the weak, the oppressed, or otherwise those who are poor in spirit, right in their own community.

Don't be fooled leaders, critics will voice their opposition loudly. As church leaders, who are on the front lines fighting for change in a time of deep disruption, begin pivoting towards "missional commitment" strategies, people of all faiths will undoubtedly give their opinion. Seeking dialogue instead of pursuing judgmental assumptions is the exact response society needs. A renewed focus towards a clear "missional commitment" can be just the strategy that interconnects the church's mission with the desired activities that many attendees are very interested in seeing lived out within their religious communities.

The church needs to be in the community, with the people they are on mission seeking, not just inside the building preparing. Church: don't miss your critical mission. Embrace the innovations that are needed to give your community a reason for hope. Be the change that your community is so eagerly craving. Give people a reason to reconsider the power of the cross, because they will be more eager and more receptive to look for faith within the church, instead of in every place but the church.

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#8

A Zoom for Every Season Under Heaven: Responding to Nandra Perry's *Charism of Zoom Church*

Sarah Brush

An exploration of the unique experience of Zoom worship in contrast with other online broadcasts including the joys of worshipping together and a reflection on how a Zoom congregation has experienced growth, change, and decline during varieties of lockdown restrictions.

In the first volume, Nandra Perry reflected on the Charism of Zoom Church and the impact it had on her small rural Texas congregation. The very concept of there being a "Charism of Zoom Church" really struck me as something for further reflection. I have a variety of experiences with Zoom worship as a Theological Educator and as someone who helps out a local benefice. For me, it is something distinctive and has been incredibly valuable. Yet my experience of Zoom parish worship has been very different to that of Nandra. I'm not sure how small a rural church is in Texas. In our benefice in Oxfordshire on a normal Sunday before COVID, we would have congregations in each of our three churches of approximately 15-30. As small, rural churches, we've not drawn new people in by our online worship, but we have drawn people together from the three different parishes within the benefice in new ways. My response to Nandra's reflection has various aspects including the consideration of what comes next, the impact on the congregation, the distinctiveness of Zoom over other types of online liturgical gathering, what a charism of Zoom as a minister might be and firstly, the joy that such interaction is able to offer.

The Joy of Zoom

Nandra began her reflection with particular reference to her experience of Palm Sunday online and the encouragement to worshippers to festoon themselves suitably for welcoming the arrival of Christ in Jerusalem. The communal joy she describes of those gathering bedecked with palm leaves or red cloths, or gathered with cuddly toys for the procession, reminded me of our recent Theological College All-Age service for Christ the King, at which we invited everyone to wear a hat, especially a hat that said something about them.

We had former military, me in my rarely-worn academic soft cap, children's toy fire/police hats and plenty of evidence of keen knitters. The theological link was a reflection on the two very different crowns which Christ wore; the crown of thorns and the image of Christ in majesty. However, the sheer delight of seeing each other in sometimes quite silly hats and hearing the story behind our various items of headgear made real connections between us. It made a virtue of being able to see everyone in their individual little on-screen boxes which for many had more often felt like a burden. Following this service, the college hosted an online pet service led by our children and young people. This too was a genuine joy with so many creatures able to gather with us and without the need for mops and buckets in church! Like Nandra's experience with her church community, there is the possibility of real joy in gathering together on Zoom and as Teilhard de Chardin is alleged to have said, "Joy is the infallible sign of the presence of God."

The distinctiveness of Zoom

My experience of Zoom worship hasn't only been in the college where I teach but also in the small, rural, multi-parish benefice where I help out in addition to my role as a Theological Educator.

In the parish, we began our online worship during the first lockdown via Facebook but quickly moved to Zoom. Like Nandra, we might have thought that our relatively elderly congregations would not have been able to adapt to this new mode of worship, but our incredible parish administrator did sterling work via telephone helping various parishioners firstly set up Zoom and then learn to interact with it. There were certain motivations for the change; partly it was because not all our congregation were connected to Facebook and partly because the lack of interaction via Facebook meant a lack of connection with other members of the church. As one of those leading services in the first few weeks, I was keen to ensure that there was a genuine feel of liturgy, in its deepest sense: That the work of the people should be apparent in the voice of priest in persona Christi being responded to by a member of the congregation as what I have styled in persona populi. This sense of conversation and interplay felt crucial to me then and continues to be that distinctive characteristic which makes Zoom worship more interactive than other online media. It has been crucial during worship but also in the time after worship when parishioners have chatted about the sermon or shared their experiences of lockdown, comparing notes on good takeaways, on local walks, and on sightings of flora and fauna as the seasons have changed.

Seasons of Zoom and the consideration of what comes next

We have had various seasons in our time on Zoom, with the early weeks when everyone was online, but we were still learning how to mute ourselves at the right time and how to share screens and sound, to the time it was only those who felt unable to leave home and we settled into a smaller form and then the tide turned again and everyone else returned during lockdown to join our regulars for a few months before they left once more to return to church buildings. We have gained a few, even in the last few weeks, as some parishioners who have been ill in hospital have now moved to stay with family and been able to be with us, often with the help of the technological skill of younger generations. There was something of a glorious time when many had returned to worshipping in church and those of us on Zoom got into a comfortable rhythm as a gathered community. I was able to select music we would never normally be able to have in church together, most notably a short section of Vivaldi's Gloria in place of the Gloria one Sunday or the video I shared of my time in a diocese in South America which I visited as part of an exchange trip. This latter was something which, in our old medieval buildings, would have been a complex and thankless task involving rigging up a projector and a small screen that not everyone would have been able to see either because of pillars or sun streaming through the stained glass windows. On Zoom, the video was "normal" and naturally flowed into the reflection I gave in place of the sermon. I remember particularly looking forward to being able to lead Zoom on Christmas Day, something I doubt I would have expected in the early days of lockdown.

Now we are in a new season, one, in many ways of decline, as some members of our stalwart online church family have received their second vaccination and felt able to return to in-person worship, so we have become fewer. More than that, we are beginning to lose those who felt able to read the lesson or act in persona populi. One longstanding participant came to his final Zoom service two weeks after his second vaccination and afterwards wrote to me, encouraging the benefice to consider continuing online in some form, perhaps by livestreaming one of the in-church services. A few weeks ago, I think I would have felt that this went against that important principle of interaction I spoke about above but in our new season where many participants choose to have their cameras switched off and no-one lingers for a cup of tea and a chat anymore, I realise we may need to transition once more. How we do so, may involve new learning for us and the task is likely to fall to the one church potentially able to have Wi-Fi. How we manage that transition is going to be vital.

There are some who join us on Zoom because of mobility issues more than COVID-19 restrictions and simply stopping online services and leaving them behind seems so very wrong.

A personal charism of Zoom

The reason that I'm aware of the seasons we've experienced on Zoom is because, early on, I felt a call to stay with the Zoom community each Sunday, even when in-person worship was going to be possible again. I felt God nudge me that some people who could return to church buildings should stay with those on Zoom, in order that they didn't feel like some kind of remnant. For me, being part of the Zoom church sometimes as a leader (and sometimes as a participant at home on my sofa with our two dogs) has been a choice, not the only option available to me. It has been one of those promptings of the Spirit that you simply don't ignore. It has sometimes felt rather small and insignificant; being called to sit on the sofa rather than literally "go" to church by walking round the corner and yet it has, without question, felt like the right thing to do. Fellow ministers who have found leading on Zoom less fulfilling have commended me for sticking with it but as it has not felt like a burden, I've found it difficult to understand those commendations. It's part of being a priest; it's just via a new medium.

The Impact of Zoom on the congregation and the community

Unlike Nandra and indeed unlike other churches local to where we are, being online hasn't seen an increase in attendance for us. Some parishioners tried it a few times but no more than that while others never started. By being on Zoom, we have, in fairness, made it more difficult for non-regulars to attend as an invitation is required whereas on YouTube or Facebook, a church can be stumbled upon or sought out. However, even though we haven't experienced a growth in numbers through our Zoom services, there have been gains in other ways. Parishioners at our Zoom services have commented on how moving they have found worship; these comments have been quite unlike the conversations I have previously had "at the church door" at the end of worship. As well as Sunday worship, our relatively new Rector has used this time to try out some new mission and ministry initiatives to see what might work best for the local community. She has offered a service of contemplation called Oasis, an online version of our regular silent prayer group, the Julian Group, an Introduction to New Testament Greek, a Lent course, and a Bible study group. It's also given her the chance to try out some possible new initiatives for families such as Brick Church (using Lego in worship), Messy Church, and Godly Play as well as a telephone service for those without the ability to join us via the internet.

As a Benefice of three parishes with rather different modes of worship, being together as a Benefice on Zoom has meant some interesting decisions about what music to share together but it has also meant that people from all three churches have got to know each other much better and made connections as individuals in ways which the monthly Benefice services in the past simply haven't achieved.

One initiative growing from being online (adopted from an idea of one of our ordinands to help members of college get to know each other during lockdown) has been the idea of the Emmaus walks, inviting people to sign up for a walk with someone else from the benefice and then walk in their randomly allotted pairing while talking about life and faith. That parishioners from our different churches might now be walking alongside each other is something of a symbol of the impact of this past year upon our multi-parish benefice.

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#9

Responding to *The Charism of Zoom Church*

Rev. Danielle Merseles

The pandemic caused us to reimagine how we worship and pray with each other over screens.

When our staff team met to discuss our first online streaming worship service of the pandemic, many elements of our traditional Sunday liturgy translated easily to the digital platform. Someone could read Scripture, preach, lead a prayer of confession, and sing a familiar praise song while sitting in front of their computer camera. Several elements utilizing congregational participation required a bit of holy imagination.

In the often longed for "before times," our congregation would be invited to share their prayers to God audibly in the sanctuary during one part of the service.

The first week on virtual church, I explained to our congregation, which I trusted was on the other side of this computer screen, that there would be an open prayer time using the chat feature of our streaming platform. People could open up the chat feature and type in prayer requests. The plan was for those petitions and praises to be read aloud by a pastor and prayed over with the whole church. I expected only a few individuals to figure this out and feel comfortable typing their prayers during this first week.

I began to pray for things I suspected were on the minds of everyone in our community: safety for essential workers, patience for parents that are home with young ones balancing school and work, and fears that plagued us all over the uncertainty and displacement of the pandemic. Then chat bubbles started appearing on my screen. Soon you could see the prayers of gratitude, praise, and desire of dozens of people.

As the weeks dragged on, all through 2020 and into 2021, this ten-minute prayer time became my favorite moment of my week.

Immediately prior to our Seattle lockdown, these beloved people came up to the communion table, shook my hands at the back door, and chatted over church coffee in fellowship hall. Now, they were out there somehow connecting through sharing prayers and worshiping together over this digital platform.

The chat window continued to pop up with more and more requests. Some made me smile, like a praise for a child's birthday, celebration of the first vaccine shot, or a rare sunny day on the horizon. Others made me more aware of what was occurring in the world, like hearing about the conflict erupting in Myanmar. There were prayers for healing from COVID for family and friends. Cancer diagnosis and treatment possibilities were shared for the first time. For several months, a person would ask God to intervene in discussions with their insurance company over coverage for a life-saving and costly cancer prescription. One morning, their name popped up with exclamations of praise that our prayers had been answered and the prescription was filled. I imagined their beaming face as they typed that news to us in their living room.

While this space existed back in the Sanctuary, it was often hard to hear prayers spoken on the other side of the room, or only a few people would share. Now it is about 50 prayers shared on your average Sunday. Additionally, its people of all ages sharing. Students have been praying for their teachers and young children express their praise for God's glory shown through creation. Our youth previously told me how intimidating speaking out audibly in worship was for them, but this virtual format gives them a safe place to make their voices heard. Week after week, the prayer bubbles on chat would flow in abundance. I found myself feeling more connected to the larger Body of Christ than I ever would have expected in this season of physical distancing. I could feel the Holy Spirit moving a breathing life into this window on my screen and through me as I spoke out prayers to Jesus.

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#10

Responding to Some Reflections on Doing Church Online in a Time of Pandemic

Cheri Kroon

> *Moving Church Online, Yet another thing we thought we couldn't do...and we did.*

Judson Memorial Church was the church family that my husband and I found having just moved to NYC in 1994. A few years after Donna was called to Judson, I was ordained and called to my own church. Over a decade later, she remains a close mentor, teacher, colleague, and friend.

I've kept a spiritual tether to Judson; Donna as a teaching touchstone, a group of Judson women whom I pray with weekly, and the grounding in a church that is absolutely thrilled to be in world. It is this tether that was a source of strength and encouragement in this time of the COVID-19 pandemic. So, I'm happy to add my story to Donna's story.

I commute to my small Long Island church from Brooklyn, so popping next door to record in the sanctuary was not an option. Pre-COVID, we had little to no online presence. However, like other churches who have been slow to embrace social media, we had our "come to Jesus" moment when we realized we could not gather in person and had to close the physical church.

It was hard to imagine us worshiping online. Unlike Donna, who years ago saw the pews as a hindrance and the pulpit as a little too high of a place for ministers, I loved them. I loved standing and sitting in unison and reaching for your hymnal and searching for the next hymn and passing the peace...I loved it all a little too much. COVID revealed that bit of idolatry as well as my very real fear of this big change.

My family was all at home together; my husband, who works in IT, my 21-year-old son, and my sixteen-year-old daughter. Putting a service online was going to be a family affair. I preached from our kitchen table, my daughter read the scripture and sang with me, my son recorded, and he and his dad edited and put it on YouTube. And for the first time, PRC had an online service available to them at 6am Sunday morning.

That was a moment I will never forget. We did it! Something I had been resisting and afraid of, and now, we had done it. It had actually taken a global pandemic for me to make this step with my congregation. I could be embarrassed about this, but instead, I'm choosing to be proud and thankful.

Virtual worship has its pros and cons. The people who were the happiest about worship online were those who had moved away and missed us, those who worked on Sunday, and those who liked church, but to be honest, didn't want to give their entire morning to it.

The people who were unhappy were those who have been mourning the loss of church for the last 25 years. For them, they saw this as the death knell for church as we know it.

But church has always been in a cycle of death and resurrection. And resurrection is never the old brought back to life. Jesus didn't rise from the grave and say to the disciples, "now where did we leave off?" Resurrection is always a new thing, and just as the disciples had some mixed feelings, so did we.

The **spiritual shift** that Donna writes about is what our congregation is also experiencing. The spiritual shift was a response to the physical shift. COVID has laid bare the decline of the church as we know it. We can only write the word "revitalization" at the top of the meeting agenda before we admit that our model might be beyond revitalizing.

Our congregation experienced two spiritual shifts in the past year. The first one was in August when I reached out to the congregation and told them that I was going to put two chairs out on the lawn in front of the parsonage, and if you wanted to come talk with me, "Please do!" The first day of these conversations on the lawn, I had people scheduled back-to-back for six hours. The second day was four hours of conversation.

Sitting under a tree, in a lawn chair with your pastor elicits a different conversation than one in the pastor's office. Ironically, even though we were outside, and people were walking on the sidewalk not far from us, the shift was to a more intimate and honest conversation. We shifted to talking about life and death and things that matter deeply. It was a practice in deepening our relationship with one-another and with God. A practice stripped of a musical prelude and well-rehearsed readings. A practice pared down to "have a seat" and "however much time you need."

The second spiritual shift has been the lesson of being led by the Holy Spirit. Just as we didn't know how long we would have to isolate or how long we would have to wear masks, we also don't know how long this shifting from one way of being church to another will take; nor do we know if the shift will continue through one or two phased before it lands someplace new. It's the great spiritual practice that none of us would have ever agreed to. Yet here we are.

I've clung fast to the 46th Psalm this year, "God is my refuge and my strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, I will not fear. Though the earth should change…"

And it certainly has. And may we change as well.

Rev. Cheri Kroon is the Minister of the Plainview Reformed Church in NY and is committed to feeding people's physical and spiritual needs.

#11

The Distanced Seminary: Ministerial Formation in a Digital Space

Michael Dormandy

Seminaries create tomorrow's churches, so if we are building a dream of digital church, we must build a dream of digital seminaries. This article reflects on my own experience of working in a seminary that abruptly transitioned to a partly online mode.

In March 2020, I was three months into a new job that I loved, teaching the New Testament in a seminary. I was quickly enchanted by the daily discussion of life-changing concepts, the beautiful Cotswold hills, the refectory meals hearing students' stories and the acts of liturgy each morning in the airy contemporary chapel and each evening in the twilit, ancient church. The heady mixture of talking, thinking, praying, and eating was energising and inspiring to me. I had loved being a seminary student for the same reasons and now I had the chance to provide the same experience to others. And then it was gone. Suddenly, we were trying to do everything online. I had heard of online theological education before and I'd even done some online teaching, but if I'd told the truth back then, I would have been dismissive. A digital theological education might tick a box, it might be a lot better than no theological education, but it would always be inferior to wandering cloisters, hurrying between chapel, library, and dining hall, smiling at friends and lubricating the Greek verbs and Patristic Christology with a pint at the end of the day. My mind was about to change dramatically. After a year of teaching largely online, I have not only enjoyed it, but I also celebrate the advantages. Of course, I look forward to the day when we can meet together again physically and without restrictions, but I doubt I will ever completely de-digitise my teaching. Ministers who have been largely trained online can and will be a great gift to the Church. When invited to contribute to a companion volume to The Distanced Church, my choice of topic was obvious – the Distanced Seminary. A distanced church is more truly church the more it can do what the church does and one thing the church has always done is raise up ministers. A distanced church needs a distanced seminary. Contributors were asked to reply to one of the chapters in the original Distanced Churchvolume and there again, the choice for me was clear.

The distanced seminary is a close cousin of the distanced monastery and so I respond with appreciation and interest to Catherine Wybourne's chapter "Being Benedictine Online." A seminary, or in British terms a theological college, is a place where a student can be free for a period of time from other responsibilities, whether in work or church, to study the Bible, Theology, and Church history, give themselves to prayer and worship, form solid and sustaining friendships, and sharpen the skills of ministry. How can these all be done in a digital space? How can they even be done better there? In the remainder of this paper, I offer some reflections on these questions.

Academic Teaching Online

The challenges of teaching and learning online are obvious: concentration spans before a screen are shorter; time delays and lack of verbal cues make real time free discussion awkward; it is harder for the teacher to command attention when they are just a thumbnail on a screen. I have found the "flipped classroom" method invaluable to overcome these challenges and to provide an engaging learning format. In a normal classroom, the students learn in the classroom with the teacher and then consolidate the learning as homework in their own time, in their own space. This structure is seen at all levels, from the middle school maths teacher teaching long multiplication and then sending a class of pre-teenagers to do several exercises, to myself, pre-pandemic, standing at the front of a lecture fall for ninety minutes discussing Paul's ecclesiology and then sending the students to write assignments. A flipped classroom changes this round: the students learn in their own time and space and consolidate with the teacher. Prior to the class, the students read, watch, or in some way, are presented with the content and we spend the class time clarifying, exploring, and applying the content I found myself recording power points where a thumbnail of me would talk animatedly in the corner of the screen commenting on the slides that I had previously physically stood in front of and gestured towards. To my amazement, it worked. It was easy to deliver the material I had got across in a ninety-minute lecture in three ten-minute videos. More importantly, this then left us with a forty-five-minute live webinar in which to discuss that material. It saved the students' time (seventy-five minutes rather than ninety) and it meant we had far more opportunity to discuss student questions. Whereas before, I used to find myself constantly trying to balance the desire to indulge and encourage student curiosity with the need to deliver all the important material, in a flipped classroom, I know all the material has been included in the videos and the live webinars are a time specifically for student questions.

tudent questions no longer disrupt and derail the key material and yet there is space for students to question freely. This flipped classroom format is made much easier by digital technology. It would not be nearly so effective if the student was just given a book or an article with a promise that we would discuss it. The video of the teacher is more vivid and energising and sets the student up better for the promise of interaction later.

There are also arguable advantages for the live discussion taking place online, rather than in a physical room. It is easy to think that a physically gathered discussion creates a more lively and energetic debate, but we would be foolish to assume this would be better for all students. Students who verbalise their thoughts quickly may contribute more to a discussion in a physical classroom and, if there are enough of them, the discussion may appear to be moving quickly and generating learning, but, equally likely, the students who take more time to move from an idea to a raised hand are getting left out. This confidence of expression surely owes itself as much to power and privilege as it does to natural temperament. It's easier to put your hand up quickly when you have lived all your life in a demographic category of privileged protection. An on-line space levels these categories, so that, at least to some extent, the marginalised can debate with the privileged. As Tanya Marlow says, "We've assumed that real-time, face to face, spoken communication is superior to other kinds. However, that type of communication most benefits socially confident, white, male, able-bodied extroverts, and this does not make it superior universally" (Marlow 2020). This shows why seminary educators, even more than secular university educators, can and should embrace online learning. The secular university is committed primarily to academic excellence, but the seminary is an arm of the church. It is committed not merely to producing church leaders for the future but to being church in the present. As such, its methods of education, as much as its content, must do justice and love mercy. Oddly perhaps, moving our classes online can help with that.

One of my own particular formational enthusiasms is teaching New Testament Greek. For many good reasons, only a small minority of our students have the opportunity to take the Biblical languages for credit, so Greek is largely an optional, enrichment activity. This is true in many seminaries. Going online has given us a flexibility of space and timing, allowing us to offer an optional second year of the language to more students and allowing us to meet earlier in the day, when, in my experience, students' brains are in a better state to engage with languages.

This is not only true of my hobbyhorse, but of everyone's. Online education has the flexibility to accommodate a student or educator wanting to go deeper into a particular intellectual interest. During the pandemic, online discussion groups and reading groups have blossomed at our college. Theological education should be about educating theologians and theologians are people with obscure intellectual predilections and passions for developing and sharing them. Often young theologians find more room to grow in digital spaces than physical.

Digital Prayer and Worship

Much has been said in The Distanced Church about digital worship, by people more qualified than me, and no doubt the same will be true of Revisiting the Distanced Church. What makes seminary worship different? For full-time residential students (and, of course, increasing numbers of seminarians are studying in other modes), one answer is regularity and predictability. The seminary years are a chance for a student to attend not just two or three worship services a week, but two or three a day, often following a set liturgical pattern using a prayer book. In this sense, seminary worship has much in common with monastic worship and Catherine Wybourne's reflections on taking Benedictine practice online has considerable relevance. Her community decided not to livestream their liturgy, as a way to set limits and boundaries on sharing (Wybourne 2020, 47). At the beginning of the pandemic, our students took the initiative and livestreamed daily acts of worship, according to our denomination's daily prayer book, through Facebook, open to anyone. I could only look on in proud amazement at their resourcefulness and energy. Since then, we have taken a similar decision to Wybourne not to share our worship publicly, not least so the students have space to experiment and learn as leaders of public worship.

For most of a year now, we have got used to various new rhythms of acts of liturgy on a screen, not reading from our red service book in unison, but following along while a designated respondent does so on our behalf. We have also seen some vivid and beautiful acts of creative worship, led by students, making innovative use of the online environment. What difference has it made to worship in a digital space? There are certainly those who complain and who miss the beauty of the chapel, the ease of concentration provided by a particular space and the peculiar sense of companionship that comes from being in the same room with other people you know and care for, but with no conversation necessary, just saying the same words of prayer.

The walk to and from the chapel provides a natural moment to subconsciously change gear into and out of prayer. With some intentionality though, much of this can be replicated online. I would encourage anyone involved in digital worship regularly to find a different space than the one used for other digital meetings or other activities. If you don't have a five-minute walk to chapel, take a five-minute walk around the room before a service or, if possible, in a garden. It may be easier to leave your phone in your pocket and ignore your e-mails when you're physically gathering for Morning Prayer, but it's hardly impossible to switch off notifications during worship and close all windows and apps on your device but one.

There is an obvious sense of companionship and fellowship from being in the same physical space, but if we perceive a lack of this online, perhaps this perceived lack is mainly due to prejudice against digital communication. Of course, there are days, perhaps many days, when we reach the end of online Morning Prayer feeling flat and frustrated. However, this of course also happens with physically gathered worship. Anyone who's ever been part of a community that prays together every day will know that some days, perhaps many days, a combination of fatigue and distraction means we fail to engage with the moment and are left with a mixture of guilt at laziness and frustration at inability. Praying anyway, when we don't want to and don't feel like it, is part of what it means to keep a spiritual discipline, which is why it is a vital requirement for seminarians. Those that have done so have time and again testified to God graciously meeting them in the desert.

Electronic Fellowship

Jesus not only preached and prayed with his disciples, but also ate and drank with them. Likewise, for us today, ministers are made not just in chapel and library, but in dining hall and bar. The wisdom of the Scriptures and great theologians of the church is reinforced in a particular way when two peers come to the end of a long day and argue out which perspective on Paul is superior and why it matters. Moreover, seminary does not merely train students for ministry, it prepares them for it and giving them the space to form friendships is part of that. The harried pastor needs a friend or two from college days on speed dial for when ministry gets tough. Is that kind of fellowship possible in a digital space? I suspect it's only our imaginations saying no. Once again, Tanya Marlow's point has force. If I think it's easier to make friends in a crowded college bar than a chat room, maybe that just reflects the fact that I'm a white, male, able-bodied extrovert. Digital spaces can make it easier for historically marginalised communities to participate in social discourse and find sustaining friendships.

Online catchups with friends can be initially stilted but can also take friendships to newer and deeper levels of sharing. Forming and building friendships online requires intentionality, but also rewards it. If seminarians don't want to be intentional about friendship, I'd question their motives in going to seminary.

The Future

I am not advocating demolishing seminary buildings. I will rejoice on the day, when I can return to the beautiful surroundings of Ripon College, Cuddesdon, shake the hands of students when they get a job they're pleased with and physically receive the Eucharistic bread and wine. However, I rejoice at all the pandemic has taught us about online education and I am not about to lay down my digital tools when the pandemic is over.

In the early centuries of the Christian era, books with spines and pages (technically known as "codices") rapidly replaced scrolls as the standard format for books. The early Christians were important and influential users of this revolutionary new communication technology. Scholars debate exactly the reason for the Christian love of codices, but this technology which is so utterly ubiquitous and essential to our lives today was popularised not least because early Christians thought it was important for communicating their faith. May Christians in our day likewise show the world how to use technology well.

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Part 2: Scholars Observations of Patterns and Trends Found in Churches Technology Engagement

#12

Insights into Church Appropriation and Views of Technology: First Glimpses into Research Findings

Heidi A Campbell & Sophia Osteen

This essay introduces the initial findings of a research study investigating the technological decision-making practices of 2600+ American churches during the pandemic. Researchers discuss three common concerns articulated by leaders when moving from offline to online church, specifically their limited technology knowledge, members access and the unexpected outcomes of digital innovation.

The COVID-19 global pandemic forced many churches around the world to engage with technology in very new ways. Some churches were caught completely unprepared, both in terms of not having the digital media resources or the knowledge in how to navigate the transition from offline to online worship in the spring of 2020. Other churches who had intentions of implementing or further developing their online presence at some point had to quicken those plans. Over the course of 2020, many churches came to realize that technology could expand their sphere of influence in new ways, as livestreamed online services allowed them to minister to those that normally would not come to the physical building regularly, connect with people who were geographically distant, and evangelize to new people. This process of transitioning into an online presence also brought up an array of challenges that churches have had to problem solve, many of which are still trying to overcome. These challenges included struggles knowing what technology to purchase or recruiting the right people to help them utilize these new technologies. In many ways, the pandemic became a technology and media experiment they many churches were forced into which created both anxiety and unique opportunities for many church leaders, the implications of which, we argue, are in need of more in-depth investigation. This essay briefly reflects on the initial findings of a research study started in February 2021 that investigates the role of technology in church functioning during the COVID-19 global pandemic in the USA.

Context and Methodology of Research Study
This study analyzes data collected from almost 2700 church in the Midwest United States related to the variety of ways that digital media was used in church worship services and ministry work during this time.

The initial data was collected in conjunction with the Center for Congregations in Indianapolis, Indiana. The Center of Congregations seeks to serve congregations throughout the state of Indiana by offering free consultations, educational events, and financial grants to help support and advance their work and ministry in a variety of areas. In April 2020, the Center noted that many of the churches that they served were struggling during the first lockdown due to their lack of access to digital media resources and equipment needed to move their weekly services online when face-to-face meetings were prohibited across the USA. With the help of Lilly Endowment Inc., the Connect Through Tech (CTT) grant program was set up. This initiative enabled congregations in Indiana to apply for up to $5000 to assist them to purchase the necessary equipment or technology subscription that they needed to connect with their congregations via the internet. The research portion of this project emerged as a way to map how and why various digital media technologies and strategies were implemented by these churches in order to help them serve their congregations during this period of social distancing.

The themes noted here come from the stage 1 analysis that worked with a combination of church demographic data, narratives of beliefs technology and the church from church leadership and focus groups on technology implementation and practices that were collected between May 2020-2021. This full study will also include a series of follow-up case studies and interviews with specific churches that is planned for fall 2021 to gather more insights on the long-term relationship between technology and the church. The main aim of the broad study is to identify the rationale, motivation, conceptual plans, and actual implementation process related to technology undertaken by church staff and leaders. We do this in order to unpack and reflect on the broader theological and social implications of these technological choices and consider the long-term impact that these might have on congregational vitality and mission.

In this brief essay, we present the initial themes and insights gleaned from discussions held with the pastors and staff of churches that received these grants, held in Summer 2020, Fall 2020, and Spring 2021. These focus groups were called "Center Tech Talks" and served two main purposes. The first was to provide a space for leaders to reflect on the things they were learning about using technology and its role in the church. This included participants reflecting out loud on the impact of their technology choices on their online worship and gatherings with members, as well as sharing "best practices" or perceived technology successes with others that were present in these online conversations.

Second, these sessions allowed participants to ask both Center staff and other participants practical technology-related questions and for advice related to specific online platforms or audio-video equipment that they had purchased.

This conversation provided useful insights on leaders' perceptions of technology, how it could or should be used by churches, beliefs about the focus of church ministry during the pandemic, and how their ideas on such issues had changed over the course of the pandemic. Approximately 28 one-hour Center Tech Talks were conducted in July to September 2020 with two to ten leaders from grant-receiving churches from specific regions of Indiana. Additionally, 18 Tech Talks were conducted in February to April 2021.

Pastors and people unfamiliar with technology are the primary people making technological decisions within Churches
Based on responses from the Tech Talks, almost all of the people that are currently making the technological decisions within churches are those that are generally unfamiliar with technology. From pastors to administrative assistants and even sound board volunteers in churches, they described the great difficulty of learning and utilizing digital equipment quickly in order to adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic move to online church.

According to our data, churches in March of 2020 were faced with more challenges than just moving online. It was not uncommon for many pastors in this study to say they had absolutely no digital technology or recording equipment available at that time. Some churches did not even have Wi-Fi or internet access in their building. Churches had to quickly scramble to get access to the tools and resources needed so that they could maintain connection with their congregants and keep their church going. For many small churches, the pastors were the key individuals making all of the decisions about technology. This was especially stressful given leaders admitted that they had no knowledge about what basic equipment they needed to purchase to even implement online worship, let along run it. When faced with many different choices and options for a single camera or microphone, leaders and pastors often felt ill-equipped and inadequate in know-how to make such significant decisions. Even when resources were made accessible, such as through the CTT grants, many pastors in small- to medium-sized churches, those under 100 attendees on an average Sunday, struggled with the responsibility of having to actually set up equipment and then record their own sermon.

Many of these early efforts involved pastors either borrowing a smartphone or using their own to record services.

The technology knowledge gap and digital divide are key challenges churches faced during the Pandemic
The Church's Technology Knowledge Gap
Church pastors and leaders alike emphasized the difficulties associated with finding people to run technology. For many, this was the pastor, pastor's spouse, or pastor's child.

The unsustainability of this became clear as people needed breaks, vacations, or to work and the church was left with an empty role and a muted microphone. Leaders emphasized the need find a specific person, volunteer, or staff member that could run the digital worship services and livestreaming.

Many churches had to work very hard to recruit volunteers to run digital equipment and help the pastor make decisions regarding technology. Some volunteers ended up being children from the youth group while others were adults working 50-60 hours a week at their jobs who were willing to help, but unskilled when it came to running digital media. Churches were dependent on these young and old volunteers to freely give their time and operate the new technology, and sometimes even had to loan their own technologies to the church in an effort to help get their services online.

And even once the equipment, volunteers, and some training was made available to churches, navigating technology and managing livestreaming were a continuous and notable challenge for many churches throughout the pandemic. As with anything that is live, there seemed to be a plethora of on-air errors, mess ups, and technological fails. For the pastors and leaders who were new to technology, these at times seemed frustrating and unsolvable. As one pastor commented, he had not gone to seminary "to be a televangelist, but it appeared God had another plan" as he was forced to make the leap into learning how to do livestreaming. Many well-intentioned volunteers also did not have the experience to successfully problem solve the technology issues which arose spontaneously. However, many leaders said that after a steep and rocky learning curve for them and their volunteers, their comfort level and ability to run a successful online worship experience greatly improved over time. Most leaders also said their congregants expressed gratitude for their online worship efforts and "grace in abundance" forgiving their mistakes amidst a steep technology knowledge learning curve.

The Digital Divide in the Church

The digital divide was noted by many pastors and church leaders working with technology as a key challenge they faced during the pandemic. The digital divide is a social issue that refers to the gulf or separation between people who do and do not have access to computers and the internet. This was an issue invisible to most leaders in this study before the pandemic. This technology gap manifested most notably in new ways.

The digital divide was often described as a generational gap, impacting their elderly members the most. Almost every church leader, volunteer, or staff member present in the Center Tech Talks said that helping senior congregants get online and stay online so that they are able to participate in online services options offered, was a major challenge they faced. They quickly found that most elderly members had no computer, smart phone, or working Wi-Fi prior to the pandemic. Further, many had no idea how to access social media or work with digital tools such as Zoom in general, let alone had access to it. Church leadership was struck with the difficulties associated with helping this vulnerable population maintain a sense of community and connectedness in the midst of a global pandemic, especially when much of their time went to facilitating online worship as the alternative to traditional meetings. This left leaders with little time to explore or develop non-digital service options for their members or help elderly members with technology questions. The emphasis on a technology-driven solution led many to feel the pandemic created more disconnection or isolation for some sections of their congregation.

Another unexpected section from the churches that were impacted by the digital divide were ways in which to navigate the non-media users and those who consciously reject technological options offered by churches. Many church leaders and pastors asked the question: How do we get the "anti-digital," "technologically resistant," and/or those with an "old school mentality" on board with online worship? Even when faced with lockdowns and social distancing that forced most churches to close for at least a time, some members and even church leaders, were staunchly against using technology to facilitate worship or the internet as a meeting space.

The refusal to pivot and adapt to technology, even if they had access, caused a strain for many leaders that were seeking to create a safe space for their congregation during the pandemic. Leaders trying to create alternative forms of gathering were faced with having to spend their time spreading positive PR and advocating for online worship. Even volunteers running the technology had to take part in this by attempting to garner support from those that still are not supportive of online church.

Technology use brings unexpected and positive outcomes for churches

Online Increases Church Visibility and Service Outreach
Present in every single testimonial from pastors and church leaders was their surprise and pleasure at how their small church's online Sunday service could make an impact beyond their members. Over half of the churches in this study were those whose congregants do not exceed one-hundred people.

Many said they regularly saw that more people had tuned in live online than would even fit in their church building. One pastor described this as an "AHA" moment and that he never expected his small church in Gary, Indiana could become a global church, as they regularly had people from different parts of the world tuning in to their service on YouTube. Many church leaders also expressed joy that previous members who had moved away or distant family members of regular attendees were able to tune in and be a part of the church service.

Online Experiences Encouraged Congregational Connections
Many Church leaders and pastors were also shocked to see how meaningful connections were reported to be made by church members online through the livestreamed Sunday service. Leaders reported about being surprised to see online chat options offered via livestreaming services being filled with conversations both during and after service. Examples were given of attendees creating plans for book groups or Bible studiesoutside of the current planned program of the church. Churches using the Zoom platform especially reported success in it helping them create community for their congregants. Leaders noted the opportunity to see congregants' mask-less faces proved incredibly helpful and "special," as one pastor explained it, for promoting a sense of community and connectedness both for them and their members. Overwhelmingly, leaders felt online technology could be used to create and facilitate genuine relationships within their churches, though this was a surprising revelation for quite a few who had been initially skeptical about online worship.

From a review of these early identified themes, opportunities, and challenges, it is evident that Church leaders became comfortable with the "new normal" of digitally-mediated ministry during the pandemic and came to realize that a church can minister effectively and successfully in the digital realm. Yet this required leaders and congregations to move beyond their comfort zone and understanding of how church is normally run and experienced. This has created a unique moment that has pushed the church outside of the four walls of the building into the new digital realm of the internet. While this initial research finds that many churches now recognize, or have at least made peace with, the idea of worship online being a legitimate expression of the church, this has not been an easy or comfortable transition for most. Many churches are still working through this transition and seeking to further develop their digital skills and offerings to meet the needs and expectations of their members. As we further analyze the studies research data, we aim to draw out more insights about church's patterns of decision-making during the pandemic.

We hope these early findings will help point towards useful digital media adoption and integration strategies for churches, as we seek to further tease out the long-term implications of these choices for a post-pandemic church.

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#13

World Council of Churches: Drawing the Ecumenical Fellowship Closer in the Time of COVID-19

Marianne Ejdersten and Susan Kim

The World Council of Churches (WCC) describes ways in which the organization was able, even amid COVID-19, to maintain a global presence while, at the same time, beattentive to grassroots needs and stories from its member churches.

The year 2020 is a year we will always remember. The year the unimaginable happened. The year of vulnerability. The year of frustration. The year of fear. A year of sadness, with many in the ecumenical fellowship affected by COVID-19 and marking the passing of many loved ones and colleagues.

Life changed overnight for billions of people. Society, offices, schools, churches took an unasked-for break. Economic hardship rode in on the shoulders of crippling anxiety and fear. The most vulnerable people among us became even more vulnerable, and the injustices of the world became even more crushing and exposed.

In the face of this, what does it mean to be the church? What does it mean to be the World Council of Churches (WCC)? Above all, the WCC wanted to be present for its member churches, its partners, its staff, and the world, by bringing hope to people that God was and is still present in their lives. But how would the WCC provide that special space for God's presence for so many people?

The world, on many levels, moved into people's living rooms. As the COVID-19 pandemic forced people to ponder life and discern what was most important, many people reached for a deepening of relationships and caring for their fellow human beings.

From the start of the pandemic, the WCC underscored its work and its messages with the realization that we are one world and one humanity that must live and act together in love and care for each other and for our creation.

As people and churches existed for weeks and months under a state of emergency, they honed their own definitions of what being a church means in the midst of the global pandemic. Millions of people began attending weekly online services around the world.

Prophetic voice

Through its communications, the WCC began to raise its profile and the impact of its work. By telling the stories of its member churches and ecumenical partners, the WCC was able to sustain influence, gain visibility, and promote good causes—all this in a communication landscape that seemed to change every day.

A strong prophetic voice became more necessary than ever. The WCC sought to lift up and convey authentic experiences, stories, insights, and values of people and communities within the churches that might otherwise not be heard. It's not always easy to tell the truth. Some of stories were critical of habitual or accepted practices; others challenged principalities and powers.

In this way, the WCC strengthened its ability to serve as a catalyst for change. Communications, moving online, became even more inclusive, with growing participation and hope at their core.

People across the world responded: they drew closer to the WCC, showing increased interest in many channels of communication.

At the heart of this communication was the WCC's new website. From March 2020 to March 2021, the WCC website was visited by 1.4 million people, an increase of 75% compared to the previous year. Most visitors came from the US, Germany, UK, India, and Canada.

The most visited pages were COVID-19 Resources and Prayers, Member Churches; What we do; News and the Ecumenical Prayer cycle. The most-read story during the year was "As world turns virtual during COVID-19 crisis, it is easy to pray," attracting 58,000 page views.

For social media, by March 2021, the WCC Facebook page had 50,440 followers, including 963 new ones, 151 posts with 6,834 engagements, for a total of 194,828 people reached. For Twitter, the WCC had 30,595 followers, with average daily impressions of 15,377 with a 1.7% engagement rate.

The WCC's new website was in fact in development well before COVID-19.

The result of almost five years of work on the strategy, concept and development, the new website has doubled the interest from member churches, the media, and the general public. The launch coincided with the start of a new era, and a new way of working globally to connect member churches everywhere on the planet.

The website also began serving as a "hotline" for media, increasing the WCC's exposure across the world. A fresh presentation of WCC programs helped provide intuitive ways of navigating the wide spectrum of WCC work for unity, justice, and peace in the world.

The main goal of the new website was to offer the WCC fellowship more opportunities for engagement with the content produced by the WCC and the whole ecumenical movement. The new website also contributed significantly to sharing key documents and resources of significant academic and historical value. It enabled fuller engagement at a global level in the vital work and important reflections of WCC's commissions on Faith and Order and Mission and Evangelism, which are the heart and soul of the ecumenical movement.

One of the main challenges was for the WCC as a global organization, used to gathering people together from all over the world; sending teams to bring companionship to parts of the fellowship facing critical challenges; organizing symposiums and meetings in different global regions. Suddenly it was no longer possible to receive guests or to travel, to organize face-to-face meetings or to organize fact-finding delegations to situations of conflict. Even the staff based at the Ecumenical Centre in Geneva found themselves working from home.

Instead, the WCC had to reorientate itself to become a digital-first organization: online meetings instead of global conferences taking place in Geneva or other parts of the world; webinars and webcasts to share the results of the WCC's programmatic work and offer support to member churches; and online prayers and spiritual resources. A special production team was set up in the communications department to assist programs in their online world. Many missed the immediacy and personal contact of face-to-face meetings, yet online webinars sometimes reached far more people than a consultation in Geneva. And the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity service in January, usually offered annually to the Geneva community in the chapel of the Ecumenical Centre in Geneva, became a truly worldwide event. Yet challenges remained beyond the simple fact that people were gathering from behind their computers – the different time zones being one of the major issues, as well as the unequal distribution of bandwidth.

Moving online is not just a question of learning new techniques but also raises new questions of justice in a divided world.

Prayers from the WCC fellowship shared in social media on a weekly basis had a positive response both in terms of numbers of visitors and meaningful comments. Through social media, the WCC was also able to respond factually and with relevant links to questions and misleading comments. The ability to block accounts that included hate speech or that would repeatedly post misinformation became vital.

The WCC was honoured as a top non-governmental organization for its work during 2020, receiving a second-place Geneva Engage Award on 18 February 2021 for effective and inspiring social media outreach and engagement. The WCC accepted the award during an online ceremony, along with other organizations in the category of "Non-profit Organizations and Associations."

The award, presented by the Geneva Internet Platform and DiploFoundation, encourages convergences around development, human rights, digital and other policy issues between communities worldwide and International Geneva, host of many international negotiations with an impact across countries and continents.

The WCC fellowship's strong interactions on social media have become a dynamic path toward a clear and resounding common voice. But pushback is inevitable when voices are strong: social media accounts regularly posting on topics such as religion, migration, and women's rights often generate responses that are hateful. How do we respond?

The WCC takes its role as a messenger of hope, unity, and faith, very seriously and continues to look at social media as a way to break down divides, build conversation, and promote diversity and respect online. How content is created and shared—and how it spreads on the internet —involves not only critical thinking but also "critical clicking."

Technology was already transforming the world even before the COVID-19 pandemic. The WCC, in a special issue of its quarterly journal The Ecumenical Review, offered theological and ethical perspectives on the digital age. A crucial question explored in the issue, "The Spirit of Truth in a Digital Age" resonates even more during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic: "Do we live in a 'post-truth' era?"

The journal explores how truth is endangered by the political and economic control exercised by digital surveillance and big tech. The issue also explores the implications of digital transformation for economics and politics, as well as for theological reflection, and what it means to be human in a digital world. The next issue focused on "Christ's love in the midst of pandemic," exploring the theme of the WCC's 11th assembly ("Christ's love moves the world to reconciliation and unity") in the context of COVID-19, while a special online issue of Ecumenical Review and International Review of Mission gathered past articles on health and healing.

Looking ahead
From the beginning of the pandemic, the WCC has tried to always look ahead with hope. From practical information to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, to cancelling or postponing meetings, limiting travels, and offering online communication instead of person-to-person gatherings, the WCC has pivoted its programs and honed its messages.

The ecumenical movement and the world seemed to receive prayers and spiritual resources with appreciation. Campaigns such as Thursdays in Black, which advocates for a world free from rape and violence, became even more important in the face of increased sexual and gender-based violence in every corner of the world. Called "the shadow pandemic," gender-based violence remains a grave concern. So do racism, xenophobia, unjust economic structures, the climate emergency, and communities vulnerable to conflict.

The WCC will continue to share public statements, prayers, webinars, and resources, interviews with church leaders and pastors, and best practices through every communication channel possible.

The WCC also continues to initiate planning for 2022, looking ahead with hope to the WCC 11th Assembly scheduled for 2022 in Karlsruhe, Germany, with the theme "Christ's love moves us to reconciliation and unity." The theme, now more than ever, resonates with us all.

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#14

Churches Online in Times of Corona (CONTOC): First Results

Ilona Nord and Oliver Adam

This essay focuses on the results of the CONTOC study based on the first ecumenical meeting in Germany on April 13th, 2021. Subsequently, cross-denominational explanations and results based on the evaluation of the German CONTOC data are presented. Furthermore, thematic foci on the innovativeness, worship practices, and education are set. We conclude with questions about the relevance and classification of the study.

Introduction

In May 2020, the research consortium of CONTOC (Churches Online in Times of Corona) conducted an international and ecumenical survey of pastors and full-time staff in church or parish communities. During this time, all sectors of society were in an experimentation mode, including the various churches and religious communities. This situation was taken up by Thomas Schlag (University of Zurich) and Ilona Nord (University of Würzburg). The idea for CONTOC was born. Sabrina Müller, Centre for Church Development in Zurich, and Arnd Bünker, Pastoral Sociological Institute (SPI) in St. Gallen, joined to take part in an empirical study. A project management team was formed, which also included Wolfgang Beck (Saint Georgen, Frankfurt) and Georg Lämmlin (Institute of Social Sciences of the Protestant Church in Germany, Hannover). This team founded the research project and invited international and interdenominational cooperation partners to join.

In the field phase from May 29th to July 12th 2020, 1551 persons participated from Catholic dioceses and 2407 from Protestant member churches in Germany alone. With more than 3000 data sets, the research group is able to draw on a detailed database to comprehensively describe worship, pastoral, diaconal, and educational practices in congregations during the first phase of the pandemic. The starting point was the cancelled worship services in March 2020, particularly for Holy Week and Eastertide, and the restrictions on direct encounters in church contexts.

Two cross-denominational explanations and results

The study focuses on how full-time employees of the Catholic and Protestant churches in Germany deal with digitization processes [i].

This includes, for example, research of the interviewees' job-oriented and private dealings with social media communications as well as the question of virtual forms of cooperation. Questions were asked about the use of digital media in the central fields of action of the churches and about the understanding of the roles of those who were active. The focus was on cooperation with volunteers and other unsalaried workers in the congregations, as well as the perception of support from church leadership structures and the assessment of the need for action in the churches. Data was collected in the areas of worship, pastoral care, diaconia, and education, as well as about the understanding of the role of full-time staff in the pastoral field of the congregation and how they deal with the challenges posed by the pandemic. One surprising result is that three-quarters of respondents see opportunities rather than risks in digitization processes within church communication (see Fig. 1).
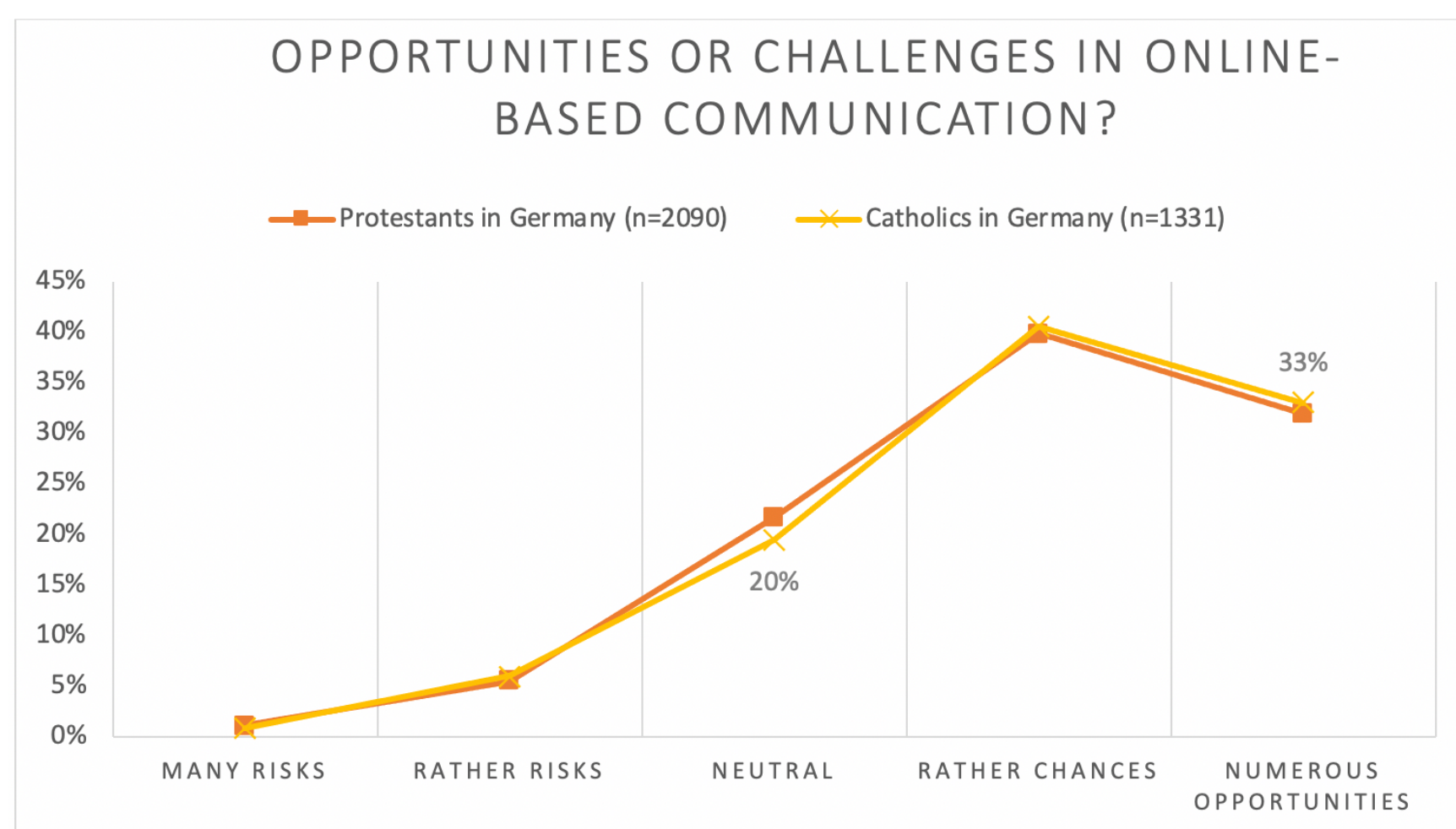

Figure 1: Opportunities and risks of online communication, source: CONTOC, calculations by the research group.

Based on many church discussions that have taken a rather critical view of digitization processes in recent years, other results were expected. Just under two-thirds of respondents also answered positively to questions about participation in digital forms of communication, especially in social media, both personally and professionally; moreover, about half declared that their congregation maintains an account on at least one social media platform. Almost 80% see themselves as at least averagely proficient, and only about one-fifth as rather inexperienced. Of course, there are respondents who - as our representative study indicates - did not use digital media during the initial lockdown [ii].

In addition, there were repeated indications that respondents had not communicated digitally themselves, but that others in the community had done so.

Thus, a less excited or emphatic and rather a very realistic attitude is discernible among the respondents: There is no reason to speak of a "technology hype" or of a "technology fear," neither based on the quantitative nor the qualitative data. We live in times in which digitization has become the new normal and must be dealt with in concrete terms, rather than arguing about whether it should generally be fought against as a global process. The respondents largely use digital media [iii] or appreciate its use by others working in the church or parish community as productive for church communication [iv]. At the same time, the more one communicated digitally, the more there was an indication of a need for theological reflection on church practice. 95% of respondents streamed a church service for the first time during the first lockdown [v]. Here, then comes, a new format for church ministry was broadly tested.

This study is primarily intended as a project to generate questions for current church development and is designed to be a representative sample. For this purpose, the population of full-time employees working in pastoral ministry was defined as the reference size, and they were contacted directly via official email distribution lists to participate in the online survey. On the Protestant side, the member churches were recruited to participate, and on the Catholic side, the dioceses. Both the size of the sample and the distribution of socio-demographic characteristics (age, gender, geography) indicate a representative selection, although not evenly across the member churches of the EKD or the dioceses. The disproportionate participation of women in the gender distribution can be compensated for by weighting the data set. But it also points out the extent to which women participated in the survey.

The assumption that the form of the online survey could reach already digitally affine persons more strongly is relativized by the representative distribution in the socio-demographic data as well as by the result that also about one fifth of persons participated who themselves have not developed or offered online formats in church services. With a certain degree of caution in the interpretation regarding subsystems, it is therefore possible to assume a representative picture for the review of the situation in the pastoral fields of action during the first lockdown. It is also striking that both women and men practice using digital media without any significant difference among the respondents and consider it relevant for community work. They are predominantly of the opinion that digital communication promotes connectivity among community members.

It became clear that digitization processes have by no means led to a loss of function or a change in role among the full-time respondents in the congregations. The respondents show clear role stability; it is even possible that the crisis has led to a renewed identification and examination of specific identification markers, thus triggering a reflection that stabilizes the personal position. However, respondents overwhelmingly see digital formats changing the ways in which they present their activities.

Innovation

Likewise, it is perceptible that reception habits are changing, and that collaboration with volunteers was of high importance during the crisis. However, these activities also made clear the high importance of digital competence for the exercise of a parish ministry. Among the responses on the need for action, both the question about further training (offers) and theological reflection and category formation achieved very high approval ratings, while the question about hiring new professional employees was answered rather cautiously. In retrospect to the first phase of the pandemic, the focus of pastoral workers is therefore on their own additional communicative and theological training and development (cf. Fig. 2).
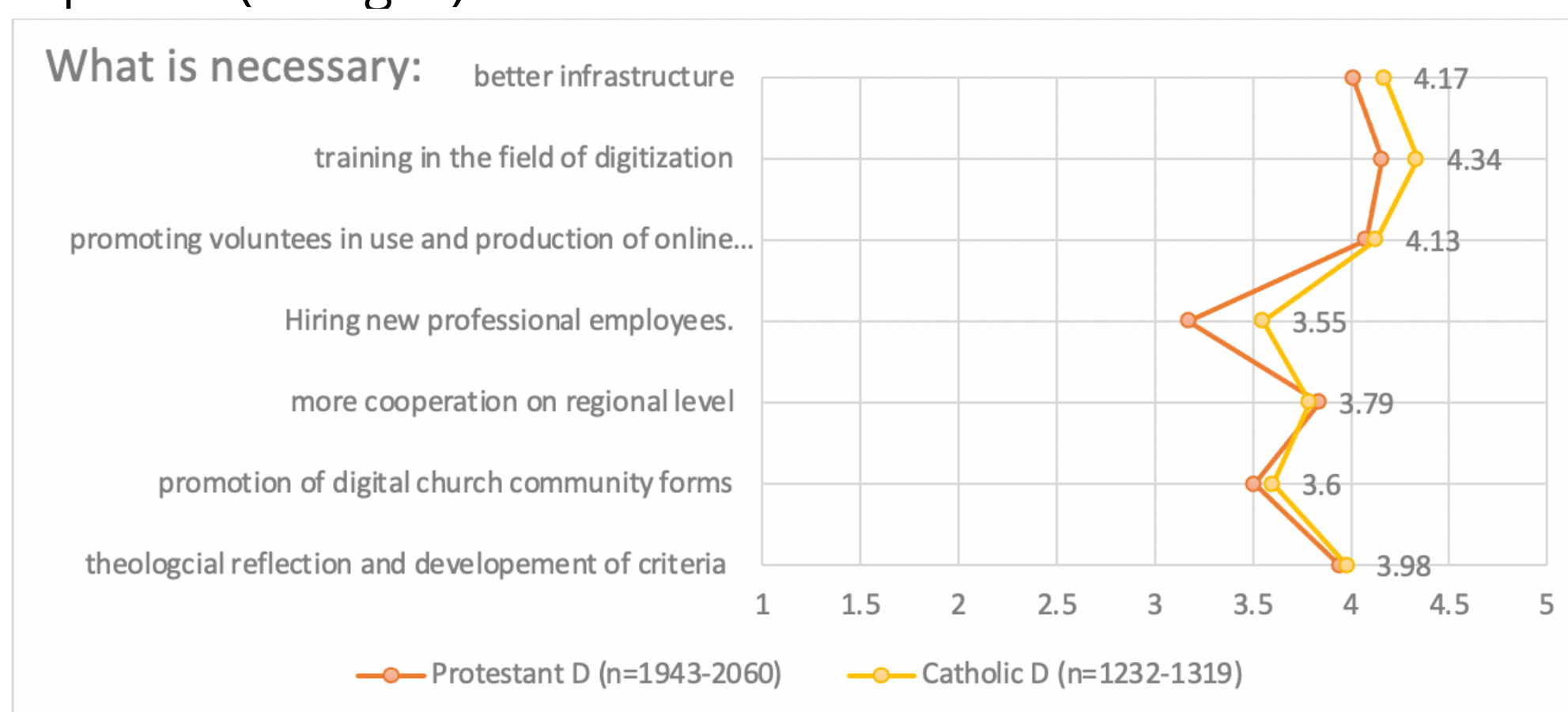
Figure 2: Need for action in online offerings, source: CONTOC, calculations by the research group.

Overall, it can be said for both denominations that the survey shows the extent to which the crisis has made the respondents' willingness and potential for innovation visible. They would like to bring about changes in customary work organization, they were pleased with the reduction in meeting and administration time during the first lockdown, and they saw it as an opportunity to refocus on activities that were important and meaningful to them.

Two statements that can be understood as common patterns of reasoning, drawn from the open-ended questions in the online survey, illustrate this point:

> The Corona crisis is an opportunity for the church to refocus. It has given us, at least in part, the time to try new things and to dare to do new things that we don't otherwise have time for. The bottom line is that if we take time away from ourselves for too many commitments, there will be no time left for daring to do new things. [KV, Z. 231-234; translated into English I.N./O.A.]

As well as:

> Corona has at least been amazingly good for my community, even though it is, of course, a disaster socially, etc. Without Corona, there wouldn't have been half as much creativity, commitment, and room to try things out here. [KV, Z. 235-237; translated into English I.N./O.A.]

Digital communication was not seen as a radically new form of church here - as already mentioned above in relation to the topic of the digital church - but rather as a supplement to practiced and traditional forms. Again, two sample argumentations that prove this:

> "[...] As an alternative in times of crisis, yes, but not as a replacement for analog church services." [GD-P, Z. 40-41; translated into English I.N./O.A.]

As well as:

> "[...] Church online services are indispensable. But most of the attachment to a church happens through personal contacts and role models, which may be supplemented, strengthened, continued, extended, and deepened digitally afterwards." [OK, Z. 181-184; translated into English I.N./O.A.]

During the first lockdown, the pandemic led to the field of action of worship taking on high importance, both internally in church congregations and externally in the public sphere. Thus, in dealing with digital worship services, there is an attentive focus on reaching people in the process with whom there is otherwise no contact (stronger among Protestant respondents) [vi] or who are immobile (stronger among Catholic respondents) [vii]. The factor of family piety in the domestic context and the accompaniment of the domestic church has been rediscovered in the pandemic.

Worship

The design of the new worship formats is clearly aligned with expectations and needs and includes different forms for active participation and co-creation (cf. fig. 3).
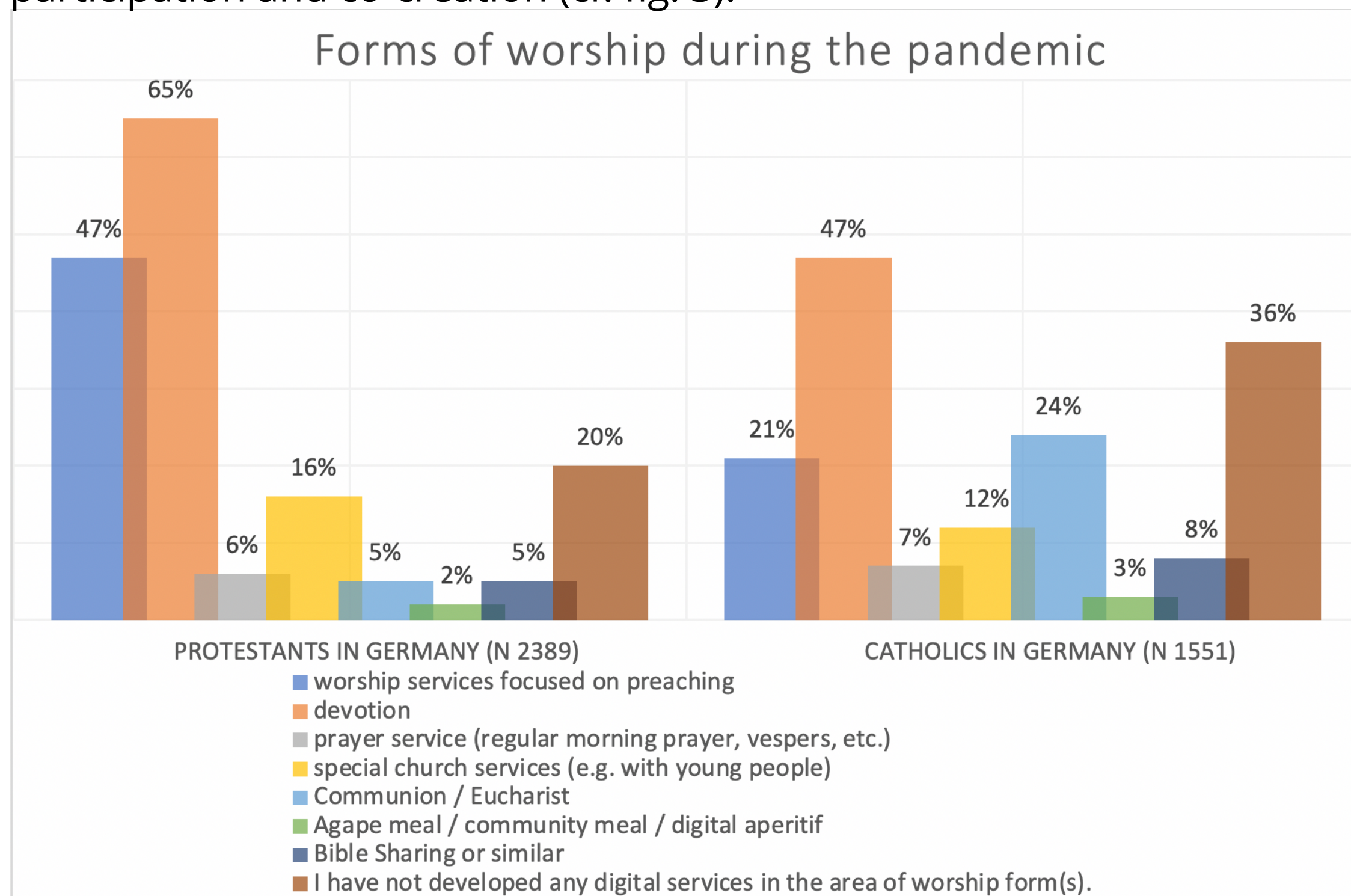

Figure 3: Forms of digital worship services, source: CONTOC, calculations by the research group.

This is even more astonishing since (especially in the Catholic Church) important and expected support services by diocesan specialized agencies, church leadership and middle institutional levels were missed by the main staff [viii]. There are denominational differences among the Catholic respondents regarding the form of worship of a digital celebration of the Lord's Supper or a so-called digital celebration of the Eucharist. In the multiple responses to online forms of worship, 4% of Protestant respondents said they were celebrating the Lord's Supper, while 24% of Catholic respondents said they were celebrating the Eucharist. Here, fundamental differences in the understanding of worship (and their consequences in practice) as well as the discussion about a "digital communion" may have had a strong influence, which is why the results should be interpreted rather cautiously. Nevertheless, they suggest that a discussion about the digital form of the Eucharist and the Lord's Supper is warranted.

Education

The area of education, especially for the elderly, is nearly absent from the spectrum of both denominations.

E-learning has come to light as an important factor in the crisis, which is hardly practiced by congregational education. It is therefore even more important that regional churches are setting a new focus here. However, it is also clear that during the first lockdown, attempts had been made in many places to hold confirmation courses and confirmation classes in attendance for as long as possible.

Pastoral care could be maintained in congregational settings through various formats, some of which had been practiced, such as telephone pastoral care, but there was also experimentation with new formats, such as digital group pastoral care via video chat.
The respondents obviously had little energy left for networking beyond their own congregations. Cooperation took place primarily within the local community and only to a small extent with associations and local contacts. Congregations of other denominations or interreligious contacts were even less important for mutual support. The question arises whether intercongregational or interdenominational or interreligious cooperation in the pandemic is seen as an additional task and burden rather than a resource.

Protestant focus

It is striking, but not surprising that some differences do exist in the Protestant sample between pastors in congregational ministry and in functional ministry. Due to different areas of responsibility, it stands to reason that the first lockdown phase of the Corona pandemic left different traces. After all, some questions can therefore only be meaningfully evaluated and described at all for congregational pastors.

Considerable differences emerge among pastors in congregational ministry as to how they were able to fulfill their role, for example. Hardly anyone expressed doubts as to whether they had been able to do justice to the role of liturgist, to get involved in the demands of digital communication, and almost three quarters even felt encouraged to become creative. The situation was quite different regarding the role of pastors: More than half felt that they had not done full justice to their role as pastor. Yet, pastoral care took place on a broad scale, albeit less in digital formats - if one disregards telephone contacts - than opportunities for personal pastoral accompaniment were found. We were able to determine that a number of pastors (approximately 30%) were rather inactive, the largest number (38%) conducted pastoral care predominantly by telephone, a smaller number (approximately 13%) were predominantly active in group pastoral care, and the others were active to a greater or lesser extent on all channels.

The level of activity showed a correlation with the ministry (congregational or functional), the type of area (rural or urban), gender, age and, of course, adeptness in using online communication media. Accordingly, the strongest need for action is seen in continuing education in digitization, but, at the same time, support from the middle level of their own church is also appreciated.

The quantitative data of the study allow the following findings regarding the area of education and participation: Attitudes toward digital media have changed, the digital skills of the respondents have been expanded, and the digital equipment of the church congregations has been evaluated or improved. Education in digital media has been of limited relevance or possibility for respondents; as providers, they have gained initial experience and can concretize their needs. Digital media education has led to its goal being seen in increasing participation in offerings, its social dimension has become very prominent, and theological and social reflections on digital media have begun.

Based on this, categories were formed from the preliminary results of the quantitative data for a qualitative structuring content analysis. The resulting category system was applied to the deductive evaluation process of the EKD data on the questions: "What is becoming less important?" (1529 responses), "Where do you think increased engagement makes sense?" (1656 responses) and "What I also wanted to say...." (908 responses). Analysis of the Protestant data revealed that most of the learning in the first lockdown took place via digital media. Respondents had to learn to use digital media within a very short period and declared reaching out to people and being their own role model as their goal. To the same extent, learning about digital media comes to the fore in the reflection. Protestant respondents not only call for professionalization and further training in all digital and technical areas, but especially emphasize engagement in the use of digital media.

Catholic focus

One of the fundamental observations of the CONTOC study in Germany is that a remarkably large proportion of church pastors feel strengthened by their own faith and spirituality in the experience of the crisis [ix] and see themselves encouraged through the experience of the lockdown in spring 2020 to creatively shape the situation through new forms of pastoral action [x]. As a result, many digital offerings are emerging, especially in worship, which are particularly striking in their variety of forms [xi], their creation in teamwork with volunteers and colleagues, their dynamic further development through feedback [xii], and the new forms of participatory involvement of fellow celebrants.

The debates on the celebration of the Eucharist (Lord's Supper) and the practice of confession, which were intensified in the Catholic Church in spring and were initially oriented primarily toward traditional ways of understanding (such as the concept of "spiritual communion," which, as a restricted form of worship participation, was primarily known as an outmoded form of ecclesiastical disciplining), are classified by the vast majority of respondents as unhelpful and hardly communicable [xii].

Open search processes can be seen among those responsible locally, both in the concrete design and in the pastoral evaluation of digital communications.

These activities are being developed with local team colleagues and volunteers. For this to succeed, however clear expectations are also being formulated for improvements in the qualification measures for church employees in dealing with digital formats, for improvements in the technical infrastructure, and for the employment of professional IT staff in the dioceses and regional churches.

Further Considerations
CONTOC is a survey that reached respondents during the first lockdown. Much will have changed in the meantime. To query these changes, those responsible intend to realize a subsequent survey for spring 2022.

The key points of the previous survey need to be surveyed again: How has the approach to worship evolved, are formats of streamed worship and thus of religion online still of primary interest across the board, or have the tried-and-tested formats of small devotionals already changed the approach to digital culture as a whole? Are more people than before accessing formats that do not yet exist in analog form, that is, that are newer? Has collaborative behavior in congregations changed? What about online educational formats: Could they be intensified or are they still not relevant? These and other questions arouse interest in the process initiated by the pandemic.

For this purpose, systematic clarifications about the diversity of (socio-structural) phenomena created by COVID-19 are of central importance, both for the relationship between digital and analog offer formats and for the practical-theological significance of the latter. Religion and religiosity consist decisively of and in communication. Since the first lockdown in Germany, these communications, however, have taken place digitally - and this must be pursued further.

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NOTES

[i] https://contoc.org/de/contoc/

[ii] CONTOC-D. Item DIGITAL3_SQ003 [I do not use ...], 21.1% of respondents from the Protestant dataset.

[iii] CONTOC-D. Item DIGITAL3_SQ002 [I use ... privately], 70.07%

[iv] CONTOC-D. Item DIGITAL4GD2_SQ004 [The digital offerings should enable community], 55.09% of respondents from the Protestant dataset.

[v] CONTOC-D. Item DIGITAL4GD5_f, 94,3% of respondents from the Protestant dataset.

[vi] COTNOC-D / kath. / pro., Item DIGITAL4GD9_SQ001 (N kath. 1491 / N pro. 2292).

[vii] COTNOC-D / kath. / pro., Item DIGITAL4GD9_SQ004 (N kath. 1487 / N pro. 2243).

[vii] CONTOC-D / kath., Item WORK_SQ 006 (N 1504). [To what extent did you feel supported by the diocesan leadership?], 33.9% only felt supported a little or did not feel supported at all.

[ix] In the Catholic dataset, 75.6% of respondents said that personal faith had particularly helped them during   the lockdown.

[x] COTNOC-D / kath., Item WORK_SQ 004 (N 1546). 70,9 % of the respondents fully or somewhat agree with the statement "I felt encouraged to be creative".

[xi] CONTOC-D. Item DIGITAL4GD1_SQ001 to SQ009 (N cath. 1551; N ev. 2389).

[xii] CONTOC-D / kath., Item DIGITAL4GD6_SQ002 (N kath 827).

[xiii] CONTOC-D / kath., Item DIGITAL4GD7_SQ002 (N 1418).

#15

Ecclesia Digitalis: Communicational Reflections on Ecclesial Religious Experience in Times of Pandemic
Moisés Sbardelotto

The pandemic made even more clear that ecclesial religious experience today manifests itself not only as an action of religation (religare) between the human and the divine, but mainly as an action of reconnection between the human, the digital, and the divine.

The coronavirus pandemic, which has shaken the world for more than a year since the beginning of 2020, has led humanity to rethink its values and practices, including religious ones. The risk of contagion led to the closing of the temples and the impossibility of celebrating public rites for the most diverse religions. However, with the potentialities of the digital environment, people have found new and innovative ways to live their own religiosity, from within their homes, through forms of online liturgy (Adam, Sbardelotto, 2020).

In the case of Brazil, from where I write, the main religious denomination of the country, Roman Catholicism. Its various dioceses and movements here in Brazil have expanded to the online transmissions of Masses and other moments of prayer in order to keep the contact with their faithful and among them. They asked people to participate in them by sending comments and messages, or using specific hashtags – and organized reflection, sharing, and training activities via the internet. The idea was to foster not only an individual religiosity of each person, but also to encourage, within the possibilities, the encounter between the people and the communities, that is, the communal experience of the faith despite the need for social distancing.

In this process, the potentialities of the digital enabled the development of new expressions of *ecclesiality*, that is, of "being the Church," through networked social interconnections. It is, in some way, the re-signification, in times of pandemic and digital networks, of what the tradition of the Church coined with the expression *sentire cum Ecclesia,* which means, "to feel with the Church." It is what we call here as an *ecclesial religious experience.*

A Brazilian example, in this sense, was the publication, on the website of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops of Brazil (CNBB), of a weekly guide to prayer for families, in PDF format, called *Celebrações em Família do Dia do Senhor* (Family Celebrations of the Lord's Day, see https://www.cnbb.org.br/celebrar-familia/). These resources began to be made available in March 2020 and were been released until the time this text was published, offering indications for an "at-home" rite, with biblical readings, prayers, blessings, and hymns. With these guides, Brazilian Catholic bishops invited the faithful to "celebrate the Lord's Day as a domestic Church, with our family members, in our homes" (CNBB, 2020, our translation), given the impossibility of celebrating the Mass in the churches.

Due to the pandemic, therefore, the faithful were forced to leave the temples and stay in their homes but were not isolated in them. The ecclesial religious experience, thanks to digital networks, was not limited to the home itself. Each faithful or "domestic Church" could also connect with other faithful and homes, bringing persons, families, and groups together in communal prayer and formative meetings by the internet, without geographical limits, especially through videoconferencing platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, where interactivity is most evident. The Church could be again "summoned out" (*ekklesía*, from the Greek, "call out"), being able to meet in assembly under the "open sky" of digital communication, interconnecting its various faithful and "domestic Churches."

In my previous essay on the phenomenon of *The Distanced Church,* I said that "in this period of social isolation, the relationship with the brothers and sisters on the journey of faith also gains a new importance. In a digital network, people create and invent experiences of sharing and communicating the Faith" (Sbardelotto, 2020, p. 76). Here in this text, I want to problematize these experiences a little more, particularly their ecclesial aspect, that is, the constitution of a "community (of communities) of faith" in the digital environment.

Firstly, I will reflect on and criticize the perspective according to which the pandemic would have led to a "virtualization of faith." Then, from a Christian perspective, I will look upon some innovative experiences of "being the Church" brought to the fore by the pandemic. Finally, I will conclude that the pandemic revealed that religious experience today manifests itself not only as an action of *religation* (*religare*) between the human and the divine, but mainly as an action of reconnection between the human, the "other human," the divine and the digital.

Online ecclesial religious experience: a virtualization of faith?
Digital religious practices, particularly the emergent ones in the context of the pandemic, have sometimes been interpreted as a mere "virtualization of faith." According to this point of view, the faithful, unable to participate in the "real" religious experience in the temples, among people of flesh and blood, would resort to a "virtual" faith on the internet, understood as something immaterial, incorporeal, antisocial, with serious losses for the religious experience, mainly the lack of human "contact." In view of this, the fear of many religious authorities is that the faithful would abandon the "real world" of faith, replacing it with "virtual simulacra" of religious practices, and, after the pandemic, will not want to return to the temples.

The Holy See, for example, published in June 2020, during the pandemic, its new *Directory for Catechesis*, a document that provides guidelines for the formation of new Catholic faithful in the whole Catholic Church. One of its great innovations was precisely to address the importance of digital culture for this formative process. However, the document argues that an evangelizing presence in the digital continent is necessary, as long as it avoids a "virtualization of catechesis," that is, a "weak" catechetical action, without "influence" (PCPNE, 2020, n. 371). According to the document, "many forms of personal interaction have become virtual, completely supplanting, especially among young generations, the need for traditional forms of relationship, preventing them from direct contact with the pain, the fears, and the joys of others, and the complexity of their personal experiences" (n. 369). But what does it mean to experience faith through digital practices? What changes and transformations are at play in these modalities of religious experience?

Firstly, by religious experience we understand the "perception of the presence of the sacred by the subject who does it" (Libanio, 2002, p.92, our translation). This experience is also understood as "the science or knowledge that human beings acquire when they leave themselves (*ex*) and try to understand an object from all of its sides (*peri*)" (Boff, 2002, p.39, our translation), "object" which, in a religious experience, is "the sacred."

A person can experience the sacred "*always and in any situation*, from the moment we reach the depth of life, there where it shows an absolute openness that surpasses all the limits and that, therefore, appears as the Transcendent in us" (Boff, 2002, 90-91, our translation, emphasis added). Religious experience, therefore, can occur always and throughout the digital environment also, although its expressions are socially and culturally conditioned.

In every time and place, and for everyone, religious experience always occurs *mediated*. The person who experiences the sacred does it primarily through the mediation of his own body – their senses, sensations, feelings. In the same way, a person who is practicing his/her faith online is not "disincarnated," his/her body is not abandoned: what digital networks make possible is an effective contact between persons with their bodies, although in different places or times. The body is *re-signified* by means of technologies such as cameras and screens, becoming *hybrid*, in the interface between the biological, the technological, and the symbolic. Thus, new modes of perception and expression of the "self" emerge, which always, however, pass through the body, as the *basic, natural mediation* of all human contact and communication.

When establishing a digital "*con-tact*," we are faced with new experiences of tact, in which we do not give up our bodies in their integrity. From the pastoral point of view, the challenge is to rethink digital mediations, so that they can favor this sensitivity and sensibility in relation to the sacred and the person on the other side of the screen. It is necessary to carefully choose the platforms, languages, symbols, and everything that the digital offers that allows us to "feel" the presence of the Other.

The pandemic period has brought to the fore a renewed form of experiencing this presence of the Other. The members of a same faith community had to gather themselves and practice their religiosity on the digital environment, revealing the emergence of a new ecclesiality.

Renewed experiences of "being the Church" on digital networks: a new ecclesiality
Throughout history and human cultures, countless other mediations of religious experience have emerged and developed – gestures, sounds, speeches, music, objects, symbols, practices, etc. "Our immediate relationship with the rite *is never so direct as we think.* It is, in turn, mediated by more hidden, older, but *equally effective* media, which are called as catechism, theology, spirituality, devotion" (Grillo, 2020, 19, our translation, emphasis added).

And there are also technical and technological mediations for the religious experience. These artifices and artificialities are not "natural" neither "fell from the sky," but are *invented* by human beings in the relationship they establish with each other and with the sacred.

"Because God permeates all reality, he can, therefore, be perceived and experienced in the most different situations of life and in every detail of personal life and the universe" (Boff, 2002, 156, our translation, emphasis added) – and, therefore, also through digital technologies. It is through this *complex techno-communicational ecology* that religious and ecclesial experience is possible today, in times of pandemic, but also since its origins.

According to Pace (2013), a religion is born from a "living word," manifested as a revelation, an epiphany, a communication to an original interlocutor (*first-order communication*). This living word is transformed into a "given word," through the "communication of the communication" of that authorized interpreter or of a sacred text (*second-order communication*). In turn, this given word is preserved in the memory and in the communication of a "community of the word," whose unity is maintained in the communication of its theologies, liturgies, and ritualities (*third-order communication*).

Today, according to the author, we have a *fourth-order communication*, because with the internet and digital media, individuals and religious groups publicly reconstruct the original matrix of the religious message. In other words, digitally mediatized religion not only takes on new forms of perception of the world in which it lives, and new forms of expression of its tradition and doctrine, but also "exposes itself to the interaction with a much wider, complex, and differentiated environment from those with which it usually comes in contact" (Pace, 2013, 93, our translation).

Especially in times of pandemic, ecclesial religious experience – understood as the reception of a "living word" and the bonding to a "community of the word" – is experienced particularly at this fourth level indicated by Pace. This experience takes place in a networked communication circuit, which connects the faithful and the sacred, but also an "other" (individual or communal) to whom the faithful narrate their experience and with whom they digitally share it. Online religious experience in a digital culture reinforces the idea that the human being "exists facing outward (*ex*), in dialogue and in communion with the other or with the world" (Boff, 2002, p.42, our translation), even in unprecedented conditions of dialogue and communion due to the "liturgical confinement" caused by the coronavirus.

What interests us here, in the light of this pandemic period, is precisely this *communicational dimension* of religious experience.

That is, not only the personal and intimate level of relationship between the "Self" and the sacred, but mainly its interpersonal, communal, and social – properly ecclesial – level, now reconstructed a re-signified in digital networks.

We are living nowadays an *onlife* experience, that is, a "new experience of a hyperconnected reality within which it is no longer sensible to ask whether one may be online or offline" (Floridi, 2015, p. 1). Connectivity has become an existential dimension of contemporary societies and, we could say, also an *experiential dimension* of contemporary religions, in what Campbell (2010) calls as "networked religion." Therefore, in order to understand contemporary ecclesial religious experiences, it is necessary to overcome dichotomies as "virtual *versus* real," "offline *versus* online." Streets, squares, networks – and temples – are more than ever connected and interconnected. The "veil" of this separation has been torn for a long time. Religious practice today reveals an important communicational and technological dimension, which the digital does not "invent" *ab ovo*, but only makes explicit in a more evident and complex way (cf. Valli, 2020).

This time of pandemic, in fact, revealed that digital media can "reconcile subjects and communities with a differential use of language. *The experience of complexity* that the rite constitutively needs is *expanded rather than reduced by new media*" (Grillo, 2020, 23, our translation, emphasis added). As the author continues, these are complex forms of participation and experience, which modify habits, languages, and ideas about the rite.

Understanding religious and ecclesial experience as a communicational and relational process with an Other (divine and human), which constitutes a "community (of communities) of faith," we can say that such experience gains new contours and expressions in the digital environment. In it, we can perceive the development of new forms of community, according to the protocols and logic of the networks. This occurs thanks to "complex modalities of signification of the *socius* and the *sacrus* on the web, in a personal and also communitarian, public, heterogeneous, and connected manner, causing both revision, transformation, and (re)invention of religious practices and beliefs" (Sbardelotto, 2019, 166).

Particularly in this period of pandemic, faith communities gathered online are often not structured based on their geolocation, and their members are not defined by their coexistence according to certain culturally defined spaces with their respective rules and habits (for example, the traditional parishes).

The communal bonding is established in a changing environment, given the ephemerality of digital connections, in which the participation in a community is defined by *who has access to it* ("What is the link to access the meeting?") and *for as long as they remain connected* (in an "intensive eternity" [Virilio, 1994]).

There is no longer the need for "initiation rites," except for *digital ones* – such as having a login or access link to the platform where the community will be gathered, knowing how to use this platform in its basic functionalities, respecting a minimum of "netiquette" that allows digital coexistence with other members of the community, etc. Thus, the sense of ecclesial "belonging" is re-signified.

The pandemic period precisely revealed that "religious practices are best understood in terms of a network of interactions rather than through formal communities" (Campbell, 2010, p. 193). In this sense, we could say that we are facing today the emergence of *digital ecclesial communities* (or DECs), which often go beyond spatiotemporal or cultural-ethnic configurations of local religious structures (groups, parishes, dioceses, etc.). "They update, with other 'means' and in other 'environments,' the same search and need for religious experience and interpersonal bonds. The DECs point to a *'new-not-yet-experienced'* *ecclesiality* amidst the historical variations of the Church's community forms" (Sbardelotto, 2020, 76).

Such networked formations are also another way of "being the Church," which emerges from the impossibility of sharing the faith in the traditional forms of the ecclesial community, given the limitations imposed by the pandemic. In this sanitary and religious "state of exception" caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the DECs point to a search for *other relationships in other environments,* revealing the need to *update* traditional communities' configurations, to *translate* them into contemporary means and modes of communication and inter-relation, and also to *create/invent* innovative experiences of communal living and communicating the faith at a time of "liturgical confinement."

Conclusions

The pandemic – not withstanding all the pain and suffering it caused to the world – was a "sign of the times" that allowed us to explicitly recognize that ecclesial religious experiences in the digital environment are real, and a real point of no return.

They are embodied, concrete, and material expressions of a humanity in search of the sacred. They are innovative expressions of a same cultural, social, and religious reality, but now digitally re-signified. And this requires a new learning, particularly for Christian churches. In view of all this, the greatest pastoral challenge is to overcome the logic of "substitution" between offline and online, between temples and networks, by the logic of *complexification*, *complementarity*, and *interconnection*.

If pastoral ministry wants to be truly Christian – in the footsteps of the God who incarnated in human history and culture, closely interconnecting the divine and the human – it is called to abandon the logic of "either/or" and assume the logic of "*and/and*." It is no longer possible to choose between living the faith "either" in the digital environment "or" in other social environments. It is urgent and necessary to rethink the ecclesial religious experience in the complex and complementary interconnection between the digital environment "and" the other, diverse social environments.

The "place" of ecclesial religious experience changes accordingly to people and times, and today it gains new meanings and developments in the digital networks. From a Christian point of view, what matters is that "where two or more are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matthew 18:20). It is a promise of the real presence from Jesus himself. The important thing, here, is not the "where" in a geographical sense, but, rather, gather together in the name of Jesus – at home or in the temple, long-distanced or close by, on a digital network or face to face – to experience His presence and live the communion with the community of brothers and sisters of faith that also are seeking to follow Him.

In short, the pandemic made even more clear that religious experience today manifests itself not only as an action of *religation* (*religare*) between the human and the divine, but mainly as an action of reconnection between the human, the digital, and the divine (Sbardelotto, 2017). In communicational networks, religions themselves, in general, can be socially perceived and expressed as a universe of religious and communal experiences that change and remain the same in communication.

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#16

From Distanced Church to Returning Church to Hybrid Church

Stephen Garner

This essay comments on three issues arising as churches, to varying degrees, return to physical gathering after periods of social isolation. In particular, issues of exhaustion and trauma, who can return to physical worshipping, and ongoing developments around hybrid church life are considered.

In the piece I wrote a year or so ago about the church entering into a period of social and physical distancing due to COVID-19, I picked up on three themes of pragmatism, creativity, and rhythms of life that I saw present in the life of Christian churches as they began to respond to the pandemic (Garner, 2020). Firstly, I noted a thoroughgoing pragmatism whereby arguments about whether it was possible to do church remotely or online, whether sacraments always required physical presence, and which bits of ecclesiology were really immutable, tended to get side-lined by a desire to get worship online for the coming Sunday. The second theme of creativity commented on churches starting to engage more creatively with their distanced communities, sometime through different people stepping up to lead in this time, reimagining what worship and preaching looked like, and learning to pastorally serve their congregations and wider communities during the pandemic. The final theme, new rhythms of life, picked up on things developed and shared by churches to provide both mundane and spiritual input and energy during everyday life in the pandemic.

All three of these themes continue to be expressed in church communities, with many church communities now reflecting further in each of those areas as the church adapts to pandemic life and, hopefully, life out the other side of it. Rather than revisit those themes in this piece, I will pick up three different themes that sit alongside those first three. These three themes are trauma and exhaustion, the returning church, and the hybrid church, each of which reflects on aspects of church life in a world shaped by the past year or so of the COVID-19 pandemic and which might point forward to what might come next.

Weariness and Trauma

After so much time spent reacting, responding, supporting, encouraging and adapting it is no surprise that weariness, exhaustion, and trauma amongst those who have been supporting both their church and wider communities. Church leaders and pastors, youth and family workers, pastoral care workers, church administrative staff, and others serving in voluntary capacities have had to adapt to both their own disrupted lives, as well as disruption to the lives of those who they serve and support. British pastor and academic, Jason Clark, expresses something of his own experience in lockdown of this sense of trauma and exhaustion:

> I am sick of the sound of my own voice as I talk with others for planning, caring, responding, leading. I am, moreover, fed up with my voice in my head - bored and enervated by myself. A deep lassitude and fatigue have settled upon me. With the promise of coming out of COVID, I am so suddenly exhausted. Perhaps it is always darkest before the dawn.

> I am at the limit of who I am, my gifts, abilities and what I can do. My best seems so inadequate to the needs around me. I feel markedly below average at every role in my life; pastor, seminary professor, father and husband. (Clark, 2021)

Clark comments that this period has been the hardest he has worked in his life. Not only because of the pressures upon himself and his own personal well-being, but in the way that the pandemic took the normal pastoral matters of "[r]edundancies, marriage breakdown, illness, bereavement, child protection, grief, loss, people moving away, and people falling away" and compressed and amplified them. Without the physical presence that facilitates much of pastoral engagement, Clark articulates that responding pastorally to people is much more difficult not only because you cannot be physically present with them, but because the lack of physical presence feels like working with one or more of the senses you use in these situations missing (Clark, 2021).

Reflecting on this, Clark considers what a response of "not doing" might be able to offer. Not simply stopping doing the things that need to be done, but rather seeking to place oneself in activities, locations and ways of being that, alongside those experiences of exhaustion and anxiety, cultivate joy, reflection, and worship found in returning to a focus on Christ. It is a re-centering, a refocusing upon what, in the midst of the chaos of the pandemic, on what is at the heart of the Christian life—the person of Jesus Christ—and reframing what needs to be done alongside the need to be refreshed and known in Christ (Clark, 2021).

As I read Clark's words, I see much of what he writes also describing my own world over the past year or so, albeit in my own context. While Clark looks to the image of Chris on the cross as his reflective lens, I find myself drawn to the times that Jesus chose to rest during his ministry, the times he withdrew from people and their needs to rest (Mark 6:30-32), when he rested in the midst of chaos around him (Mark 4:35-40), and when he rested to pray and reflect (Matthew 14:22-23). Emerging from lockdowns, being given a measure of protection by vaccines, and being able to gather again physically in worship, work and play, should not mean that we simply swap one set of anxieties for another. Instead, it means we will need to be kinder, more considerate, and more forgiving as we all re-emerge into a changed world, acknowledging the impact it has had among and the exhaustion and trauma many are suffering from.

The Returning Church

Depending on your geographic location and the efficacy of measures taken to minimise the impact of COVID-19 in those places, some church communities have returned to meeting physically together as before the pandemic, some have returned to a different form of physical gatherings, while others continue in some form of social isolation and lockdown. Almost all church communities, though, will have be changed by the past year in some way. For some the cry has been for a return to "real church," meaning a return to the forms and practice of worship and gathering they had before the pandemic. Sometimes this is wrapped up in the very real need for flesh-and-blood human relationships with physical presence and community at the heart of their desire to meet together. For others, there is a sacramental dimension framed around the performance and receipt of sacraments, such as the holy communion or baptism, seen as a mark of a fully functioning and salvific Christian community. Others wrap up their desire to return in the language of religious freedom—placing Christ above Caesar—or a trust that God will protect them from the virus, or even that the virus itself is a hoax (Bradley, 2020; Conger et al., 2020; "Covid in Scotland," 2021; Wu, 2021).

What is apparent, though, is that that gradual return to physical worshipping has not been without the cost to the wellbeing of church members and their leaders, and in some cases a deeper awareness of how the pre-pandemic model of church was invisibly marginalising a range of people who found the online or distanced church initiatives liberating, supportive, and participatory. As we return to physically worshipping a key question will be whether these new perspectives including how we service those who are ill or at risk medically, unable to gather for worship due to work or other commitments, those with disabilities or impairments, and those for whom the physical meeting was in other ways painful or inaccessible?

Do we go back to "real church" if we won't improve things, and what about the distanced church model worked better for some?

An example concerning these questions is raised by Australian theologian, Louise Gosbell, describing the experience of worshipping with her family during lockdown. Gosbell has a 13-year old daughter with a complex variety of health conditions, learning difficulties and anxiety which make negotiating physical church gatherings a complicated affair for her and her family. In relation to church being accessed through an online, distanced mode, Gosbell (2020) comments that for her daughter:

> ...this is the first time she has felt completely comfortable 'in church' for a long time. She has a range of health conditions, learning difficulties and anxiety which make church a Pandora's box of potential anxiety-inducing situations. The people are overwhelming. The music is too loud. Mum talks too long to people after the service. And a million questions swarm her mind at once. What if a stranger tries to speak to her over morning tea? What happens if the order of service deviates from what she is used to? What happens if someone asks her to read out loud or spontaneously answer a question during youth bible study? What if she accidently eats something contraband over morning tea and ends up with an anaphylactic reaction? The potential causes of stress for Maisy on any given Sunday are innumerable. (25)

The distanced church environment, which included the prerecording of the entire church service then available through YouTube, allowed Gosbell's family to manage the church worship experience in ways that enhanced their daughter's own worship and participation. The ability to pause and re-watch parts of the service, to moderate the volume of speaking and music, and to control their home environment and remove unpredictable stressors allowed their daughter to engage with, enjoy, and learn from the church service in ways not possible if she was there in person. Gosbell (2020) also comments that other parents she's spoken to also found a new freedom in worship with the families through the distanced delivery, and that is provided not only better experiences for some with family members with disabilities, impairments and illnesses, but also opening up worship to those physically distanced in rural and isolated areas, as well as those whose everyday routines do not allow physical presence at a set time on a Sunday morning (26-27).

It doesn't replace all aspects of flesh-and-blood presence but does add a new dimension as Gosbell (2020) notes that "[d]uring lockdown, our family desperately missed face-to-face connection with members of our church community, but we also found some surprising benefits to participating in church online" (27).

My own observations of church communities returning to physical worship bears some of this out. I hear more conversations that demonstrate that not all people will be able to return physically due to ill health or disability, minimising risk to family members, or changed circumstances as a result of the pandemic. These conversations sit alongside others that talk of getting back to "real church," but I am hopeful that in many places an awareness of one's own inability to meet in person imposed by the pandemic might raise awareness of those who cannot attend "real church" on a regular basis and so be accommodated more willingly as valued members of a congregation or community.

The Hybrid Church

Over the past year the term "hybrid church" has been getting an increasing amount of airtime. In the past, the term might have been used to describe a church community that met physically in person but who had different worship services with different styles, or had a range of ministries, or various forms of diversity within its congregation. It was also used to describe some churches who were involved in reimagining church located outside of the church buildings in partnership with the wider community, mixing worship with business as mission, connecting with arts and culture, or various endeavours under broad brush banners of "missional," "incarnation," or the "Fresh Expressions" movement ("Fresh Impressions," 2021).

In the recent context, the term has most often been used to describe church communities who meet both physically and in online spaces. Typically, that presents as the synchronous streaming of a physical church worship service through an online platform like Facebook or YouTube or as the recording of all or parts of a church service which is then uploaded for asynchronous viewing by church members and other interested people.

This has required the development of new sets of skills in churches not only for digital technologies, but also to understand how copyright infringement might happen with music and other media, better practices around the sharing of personal information and images of people in services, and supporting those with anxiety or access issues around technology both in producing and consuming the resources created (Knightley, 2021).

In a recent interview, Rosario Picardo, co-author with Michael Adam Beck of Fresh Expressions in a Digital Age, notes that even within a congregation there will be different categories of people who will handle returning to the church differently creating different layers of hybridity in church communities (Picardo & Beck, 2021). In response to a question on this he replies,

> Yeah, that's a great question that everybody is wrestling with right now. And I think there are a few different categories of folks. The first is those pounding on the doors of the church who want to get in and worship right away. The second is those that are more reluctant to come. Once there's a vaccine, and the vaccine is more widespread, they'll come back. Then, there is a third set that may never venture back as much. They may be very infrequent, but they'll possibly worship online. (Ricardo & Michele, 2021)

Picardo makes some pertinent comments about how churches, particularly in worship services, will need to consider who the audience they are addressing is. In the past, he notes, the online viewers have been of secondary consideration to those who are physically present. If churches are going to effectively engage with both physical and online members simultaneously, he contends, then we will have to think more intently about how each group experiences things like preaching, fellowship and community, the length of singing and song choices, and so on. Hybridity will be found in both the modes of delivery and in the compositions of the congregation(s) (Richardo & Michele, 2021).

Tom Berlin makes some similar comments about hybrid church initiatives, arguing also that churches need to have a clear person-centered focus for what they are trying to achieve. For Berlin, this starts with thinking about what does returning to in-person ministry look like, beginning with things like pastoral care, discipleship, community service, which in turn leads into thinking about worship.

This reframes what churches are doing away from purely physical and online Sunday church services into the broader sense of ministry of the church to people in various locations, situations, and abilities to participate in the church community physically and virtually.

Berlin also highlights that while the church may have responded in urgency to move online during the pandemic, the best results will come out of a long-term commitment to resourcing and learning how to do online ministry well and to reviewing that just all ministries are reviewed and updated (Berlin, 2021).

In his reflections on the recent ruling by Lord Braid, who in response to petitioners from some Scottish churches ruled that the Scottish Government went too far in closing church buildings in Scotland during the pandemic, Pete Phillips, continues the line of thought that online ministry and church are genuine and valid forms of ministry provided the focus remains upon the worship of God and a concern for the fullness of life for individuals and communities. He comments:

> Evidently, for the bulk of the Church across the world, online worship has become a staple part of pandemic culture. It has provided a place of meeting, a focus of prayer, an opportunity to hear the word of God, and for many a place to celebration the sharing of bread and wine. Many churches, including the Church of Scotland, the Church of England and the Church in Wales, along with Catholics, Baptists, Methodists, Pentecostals and different Orthodox bodies have worshipped God online throughout the pandemic, voluntarily closing down their buildings. For them, online worship has become a pioneering place of encounter with God and with lots of new people who have peeped into online worship and who like what they see. (Phillips, 2021)

Viewing this in a positive light, Phillips refuses to give away physicality and our embodiedness though. We may be richly present to one another virtually in our online communications, while at the same time remaining embodied in our different locations. Our hybrid experience of being both virtually and bodily present presents its own form of hybridity located not just in our meetings but in our own persons. Phillips articulates this as follows:

The ways in which churches bring together physically and non-physically its people in post-pandemic times will be a significant matter for churches over the next few years. The language of hybridity may not necessarily be used, but the impact of the pandemic on how churches gather, worship and minister will need to take a multitude of new complexities into account, on top of the complexities that congregations and churches were already concerned with before COVID-19.

Final thoughts

The themes picked up in this piece of trauma and exhaustion, the returning church, and hybrid churches all point to the very human dimension of transition from the in-pandemic church towards the post-pandemic church.

Different communities are at different stages of emerging from the pandemic, with many still in the grips of its direct effects, so each community will vary in its journey. It is my hope that church communities will reflect on how the pandemic has affected and shaped their own church communities and the wider world around them, and in doing that they recognise that there are many who will be in need to 'not doing' and resting and need to be supported in that. That there are also those whose found new life in the worship of God through the use of technology and the opportunities to participate with others that were not present when doing "real church." And that the return to physical gather will not be same for everyone in a congregation, and the church needs to think creatively about how to worship God and minister to others in ways that celebrate the diversity of the body of Christ.

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#17

Friends in the Cloud

Matthew John Paul Tan

In this essay, Matthew Tan finds himself an unexpected test subject of his own theory about the incarnational status of meeting online when he has to move to a remote location and rely on the online presence of his friends in other cities around the world. While it becomes a visceral experience for him, he finds that the online format has completely changed the type basis of his friends' presence to him.

In my earlier piece "Online Church, Common Good and Sacramental Praxis", I made the case that, in spite of the virtuality of the digital space, the Body of Christ can still be made sacramentally present to us. Little did I know that, less than a year after making that hypothesis, my life would take a direction where I would end up putting it to the test. At the beginning of 2021, my work took me to the rural diocese of Wagga Wagga. I left the comforts of the city that I called home for a decade to take up residence in a remote location where I knew almost no one, and as we transitioned from the honeymoon to Lent, the isolation quickly set in.

Though I have been taking steps to network, it has been slow. In my isolation, I quickly found myself longing for the familiar, and I arranged as many chats as I could with friends from all my old stomping grounds in Sydney, Europe and the US. This experience of finding support in my friends in the cloud became a source of solace. However, it also made me realise that I needed to qualify my earlier thesis in three respects.

One dimension that I immediately experienced was the sense of catholicity, as my networks converged around me to cut through the loneliness. Because I moved around so much, I have made friends from around the world who have become a source of stability amidst the many changes in my own life. The move to Wagga Wagga was no different for me, and the isolation was ameliorated by voices from Connecticut, Lazio, British Columbia, Victoria and New South Wales. The remoteness I felt in my situation was broken by these far-flung regions being pulled into my purview, as experiences from those places were shared along with my own experiences in this little corner of the world.

I sensed that their pixelated manifestations, mediated further by servers around the world, could incarnate the presence of Christ's Body and His Communion. However, it could only do so to a point. The longer I spoke to my friends in these places, the more I desired to be with them, that I might fully incarnate that communion. What was more, I found that this desire for personal encounter was coupled with the desire to be in thoseplaces where they resided. In my desire to be in their place, my own place of the world became eclipsed, as I started mapping out my friends' situations onto my own. Though my friends will forever remain a balm of stability amidst the shifting sands of my life, I also have to realise that in the experience of my isolation, the catholicity engendered by my reliance on them is via the creation of an abstract space that swallows up any real belonging to my own local place.

A second dimension of the experience of my friends from afar is their presence through the screens. In my previous piece, I argued that, as members of the Body of Christ, the word who became incarnate and wove itself into all reality, the Church's presence is no less real simply because it has been digitally reformatted. In the case of the communion of my friends, I perceived a presence traced by voices and faces. It was a presence that was visceral and cut through the strings of codes, walls of pixels and veils of monitors. However, even as I perceived this presence, I also realised it was a presence that had become reformatted, and here I do not mean just digitally. At its core, I realised that the whole basis for my friends' presence had shifted, and Ironically, it had shifted away from my friends themselves and towards myself. Put another way, their presence had become real only because I desired for them to be real. Their presence was visceral, but I realised that it was only in my own viscera that their presence became real. Without denying that there was a presence that cut through the digital veil, I had to concede that what was made present was subjective rather than objective, perspectival rather than tangible. The effect of this type of presence was that it accentuated my desire for the other place. There was a realization that this perspectival presence was not enough, and that I desired their objective and embodied presence.

A third dimension revolved around the theme of skin. Whilst I did say earlier that their voices and faces marked their presence on the screen, I also realised that this digitised presence was not only subjective, but also digitally modified.

Their presence was possible only because their skin had been overlaid by the digital skin of an avatar. The avatar de-contextualised the person present before me, as all those little details about that friend's surrounds and even that friend's body became cropped out to fit the screen.

In some instances, even the appearance of the face itself can undergo further modification thanks to the use of filters. In the end, these technologies, while extending the range of my friends' presence to me, modifies and curates that which is made present to me.

To sum this up, little did I realise that I would become the guinea pig to test my own hypothesis about the reality of the presence of the Church in an online format. What is more, I did not realise that it would involve one of the most intimate areas of my life, in one of the most sensitive times of transition. Nevertheless, I continue to hold onto the patristic theme that, through all the transition, the Body of Christ abides, even as it abides in the cloud, for that and that alone, can be my security in the shifting sands of my sojourn through town and city.

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#18

Enabling, Extending, Disrupting – The Shift to Online Church

Peter Philips

In this reflection based on his previous article, Pete picks up the theme of enabling, extending, and disrupting. He asks whether we are doing church online or online church, whether we are bringing ritual and sacramentality to the new church and explores the growing concept of the Hybrid Church.

My article for The Distanced Church (Campbell, 2020) focused on a gradation of responses to the shutdown of physical spaces for worship during the pandemic: enabling, extending and disrupting (71). I further suggested that this gradation followed the shift noted by Chris Helland and others from church online to online church – or the shift from the replication of church worship in buildings to the existence of actual church worship in online settings/space (72). Such a shift would entail ritual activity online rather than ritual being located always in the physical space (Berger, 2018).

My gradation tends to be a positive look – as is Heidi Campbell's form in her own contribution to Distanced Church: transferring, translating, transforming (Campbell, 2020, 51) – evidently, I had taken note of Heidi's findings in Exploring Religious Community Online (2005). But I have noticed, through the whole year, the sustained resistance even to church online never mind online church. Such resistance occurs in various digital expressions. For instance, the other day, a tweet appeared on my timeline decrying online church as an aberration of real church; a podcast appeared with scholars who have appeared in this series of books about online church not replacing real church; and, of course, there are books like Jay Kim's Analog Church (2020), which flatly deny that technological mediation should or could replace physical proximal presence as the contemporary manifestation of church. And this despite the research, which Tim Hutchings outlined in Creating Church Online (2005), that online expressions of church tend to supplement rather than supplant on-site churches.

A good example of how much some in the Church resist making the move even to church online, never mind to online church, is in the various debates over the Lord's Supper (see my Bread and Wine Online resources for many of the views expressed in the early Pandemic (Phillips, 2020). So, three of the larger denominations in the UK, Catholicism, Church of England, and Methodism, all decided to cease the public offer of the bread and wine received by the congregation at the Eucharist/Lord's Supper and replace it with "Spiritual Communion." This rite goes back to medieval times whereby those not able to be present for the Eucharist were assured that receiving the benefit of that Eucharist was dependant not on consumption of the elements (the bread and wine) but on the part of God: the benefit was a grace gift given by God. As such, many clergy and ministers continued to celebrate communion both in domestic and ecclesiastical settings, often partaking of the bread and wine themselves, but inviting their congregations to say a prayer that God might give them the benefit of Spiritual communion.

As Simon Rundell (2021) has pointed out in various webinars and conference presentations, spiritual communion lies behind everything about worship and connection with God. We are always dependant on his grace. God is not a slot machine which dispenses grace at our behest. The celebration of the Lord's Supper is both a memorial of Christ's death on the cross and a prefiguring of the crucifixion in which Christ offered his body and his blood to save creation. For many, the one Eucharistic moment is a moment of transcendence in which the participant shares with all creation in that salvific moment regardless of their actual spatial or temporal location. With this in mind, the Eucharistic is always a moment of Spiritual Communion when we recognise the body of Christ – in Pauline terms, the church militant and triumphant (1 Corinthians 11), the saints both at rest and on earth, and in Johannine terms, somehow, the very body and blood of Christ (John 6). This Eucharistic moment is an important theological symbol of the transcendence of the Eucharist beyond the purely physical, and in concord with John 4 and Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman, a shift towards spiritual worship no longer limited to the confines of Mt. Gerizim or the Temple of Jerusalem (John 4:21-24). One might suggest that further visions like the one in Acts 10 could be seen as a move towards a church without walls as proposed by the Church of Scotland decades ago, and by another contributor to Heidi's first collection, Reverend Albert Bogle of Sanctuary First (Bogle in Campbell 2020).

But the particular form of Spiritual Communion promulgated during the pandemic locks the Eucharist back into physicality rather than expands it into the cross-dimensional ritual space of the Eucharistic moment.

It says that the physical elements need to proximally present with the priest who consecrates them. That it is his or her hands which do the consecration (for some traditions in persona Christi) and presumably convey the grace gifts to those partaking of the elements. Bread and wine in other locations cannot be consecrated in the same way. But why not? If God does the consecrating, the blessing, the giving, then as other traditions have accepted, why not allow online Eucharist to be "a thing" – why not push Spiritual Communion even further and accept that the whole ritual is a gift of a God who is over all, in all and through all (Ephesians 4). Indeed, again noted in Heidi's contribution to Distanced Church as well as in Pew Research (2018), people go to church in order to be closer to God, a whole 81% of the church-going public want to encounter God in their experience of Church. How are they to experience God is ritual engagement is limited to the physical and they are barred from the physical.

Many have died during the pandemic, even more have suffered poor mental health and social isolation. Such suffering without consolation of the means of grace which, in Wesleyan terms, is seen most fully in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Therefore, the resistance to shifting ritual online will have caused Eucharistic depravation but more importantly profound spiritual loss at a time of great need. But the pastoral depravation extends permanently to those unable to come to physical church for whatever reason. Disabled people, the housebound, the long-term ill, those with mental health conditions which inhibit them being comfortable in crowds or at Church, those who find Church a fearful place following abuse scandals or indeed their previous experiences of Church. The strong insistence that communion can only be experienced in proximal physical expression – in the physical presence of the priest/minister officiating, probably in a church building, and at a specific time, excludes many – both potentially those listed above but also those who are having to work in care homes, hospitals, shops or leisure industries.

Who gets to be a member of the body of Christ in a Church which states that access to the Lord's Supper is limited wholly to those who can be present physically when the church decides to meet? Evidently, different traditions answer that question in different ways. Primarily, perhaps, membership of the body of Christ is by baptism rather than partaking in the Eucharist.

But in an increasingly asynchronous 24/7 culture, perhaps the shift needs to be made to move away from a church which only offers access to the means of grace in a physical, synchronous context.If the pandemic has taught us anything, it is that the social relationships necessary to recognising the body of Christ are as real in a Zoom meeting as they are in a meeting at the local chapel.

But this also highlights the need to make a more radical shift towards online church rather than mimicking on-site/physical-building church online. Indeed, it was interesting that this is what church enabled in the first few weeks of the lockdowns. We replicated physical church and livestreamed this replication. So, as churches exit lockdown, we do the same. We do church in the building (often to a congregation unable to sing and usually masked) which we then livestream to a congregation in the relative safety of their own homes. But in between, church discovered the importance of extending such worship to include interviews with people in the congregation, offers of help through prayer and charity to those in need, preaching from diverse locations and the reading of Scripture from homes. This diversification of worship extended towards online church by making ritual and practice effective in an online medium – a plurality of locations, a plurality of voices, a plurality of needs brought together through the digital medium to enact prayer, social action and the worship of God. What was common was not the physical building but actually the digital platform – digital space became holy space.

Indeed, so effective was this transition to online church that one congregation I am aware of are not questioning how they replicate the social interaction of zoom when they go back into the physical building. So, they noted that zoom church allowed everyone to see everyone else – in prayer, in song, in reflection. Worship was face to face. The church leader compared this to normal in-building worship where the congregation sat in rows and looked at the back of other people's heads, all focussed on the preacher at the front. In a way, such worship is like Bentham's panopticon – allowing the preacher to see who is still awake rather than promoting social interaction within the body of Christ. So, the church leader noted that now the church is considering removing all the pews and sitting in a circle to allow them to see one another's response to the presence of God amongst them in the worship. Online Church deepens an experience of church so much that it needs to impact in-building church.

In different ways, the Church enabled exiting patterns of church to be replicated through digital technology leading to expressions of church online. But the church also extended those patterns towards online church, incorporating ritual activity into digital media which meant that religious ritual was both expressed and experienced in digital space.

Moreover, such extension potentially disrupts in-building church or church online, by taking aspects of online back into the experience of in-building church when the lockdowns are withdrawn – with the digital ritual enhancing the theological expression and representation of body of Christ. Three brief examples of this extension:

- Nel Shallow ceased meeting her rural congregations early on in Britain's first lockdown. Instead, she turned her home into a chapel, leading others in regular prayer and reflection and particularly in Agape love feasts often focussed on female Bible characters like Ruth. The love feasts were a traditional celebration of fellowship involving bread or cake and a drink – a non-eucharistic meal popular within low church revivalist groups during the Evangelical Awakening. Such rituals drew participants into a ritual engagement with God, gave them space and time to reflect on their experience of the pandemic and offered some narrative notes on which to build their own pandemic spirituality. Of her four churches, one is remaining online, one in-building and the other two are offering a hybrid approach to ongoing worship (see below).
- Miranda Threllfall-Holmes took to Facebook Live and began leading regular prayer times in the morning and evening. From early on, she began to introduce silence into the prayers and on one day invited the congregation joining to list prayer concerns or names in the text box under the video of candle. The names listed began drifting up the page and were accompanied by hearts/likes. The effect was digital ritual – names and hearts ascending the screen like incense presented to God. A simple and effective exploration.
- In a rural setting, which limited the use of digital technology, one church leader started to meet with his conversation by phone. Each Sunday morning, they met together and other joined them gradually expanding their congregation by 400% - from three to twelve. They rejoiced at hearing each other, at being able to sing hymns and pray together. They fear going back to the building and facing decline since the twelve are gathered from different locations rather than the one village. But twelve is a good number to start something new with God.

Each of these models talks of disparate technologies being used to create ritual activity in online space. Each of them represents online church rather than replicating church online. Each of them has persistent implications for church beyond the pandemic.

But it seems likely from research such as (Brendan Research 2021; Ganiel 2021; Village and Francis, 2020; BARNA, 2021) that the big winner from the pandemic will not necessarily be online worship but rather online discipleship. Interesting this lesson seems to have been learnt by more Catholic denominations first. So, in Glady Ganiel's research (QUB 2021), Catholic churches tended to focus on multiple resources per day or week whereas Protestant churches tended to focus on replacing Sunday in-building meetings.

It was the Catholic pattern which grew strongest and remained consistent across the lockdowns – a growth in discipleship: prayer meetings, bible studies, compline, teaching and across different cultures from Africa to Asia to Europe and the Americas. Intriguingly, even if churches go back to worship in-building, it may be that they remain at home for their training and learning in Christian discipleship.

Despite Jay Kim's Analog Church, supported by many evangelicals resistant to technology, trained by McLuhan, Postman, and Borgmann to be suspicious of technology's motives (if technology itself ever has a motive), many European and American churches are deciding to continue online church into the post-pandemic period. This may be a good thing to do. We don't know whether other pandemics will arise from the Extinction Event which our own activities have spawned or whether the rolling endemic of COVID-19 will cause further spikes and new virus resistant strains. Such events will push us back into online church. But what we have learnt allows us also to disrupt in-building church for many of the reasons noted in this article so far.

One name for this new form of church is Hybrid Church – the merging of online church and in-building church in a fresh expression of church for a networked society. Hybrid seeks to bring together different aspects of the body of Christ – those able and comfortable to be present in buildings and those able and comfortable to be online. It's an inclusive church which could fit well into asynchronous forms of engagement and allow for both in-building expressions of proximally physical church (catering for those craving post-pandemic physical expressions and hugs) and online safety.

Such congregations will need to experience ritual together and so what we have learned during the pandemic about adapting ritual practice online will be invaluable. But more needs to be done about the technology for hybrid church – technology which allows online and in-building congregations to be present to each other and have social presence to one another. Moreover, ritual practices which bridge in-building and online church will need to be developed.

Moreover, new ministry teams will need to be developed to provide ministry both online and in-building and new financial practices to support the dispersed church. There has been much innovation during the pandemic and the church has engaged well with various forms of technology to enable worship and discipleship to continue. The church has become more domesticated – an important missiological shift since it has allowed more people to attend online worship from their own homes – and more flexible.

This takes the church interestingly back before the Roman appropriation of Christianity and the shift from domestic church meetings to formal in-building worship in basilicas. But domestic church means a smaller, more adaptable, more inclusive church might be model of the post-pandemic church rather than megachurches – we may experience Christian fellowship more online than in-building and that shift may well undermine the mission and finances of the local and denominational church. Models such as hybrid, discipleship-focused, online may well lead to many small chapels and churches to lose their hold on their buildings and be forced to merge.

The big question will be whether the shift to online church offers more potential for life and renewal rather than for the acceleration of decline and dispersion.

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#19
Imagining the Post-Digital Church
Michael J. Paulus, Jr.

This essay focuses on the ongoing need and opportunity for church leaders to continue the process of digital transformation and imagine new forms of the post-pandemic church.

Soon after the beginning of Lent in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced churches around the world to become more digital—to use digital technologies to mediate worship services and other elements of church life. Some churches had the technological skills and tech stack in place to navigate this change, but many had to obtain these to sustain their faith communities and practices. The response of many churches was hindered by digital divides, including inequitable access to digital tools and the digital literacies for using these tools well. A year later, as the end of this pandemic seems visible, the universal church is faced with the question: How will the experiences and experiments of the last year shape the future of the church?

Digital technologies have been reshaping our lives and the environments in which we live for decades. But within the last ten years, due to advances in and the impacts of transformative technologies such as big data and artificial intelligence, there is increasing attention on the need to critique as well as intentionally integrate digital technologies into our lives and institutions. Klaus Schwab, founder of the World Economic Forum, claims we are living through "a fourth industrial revolution ... that is fundamentally changing the way we live, work, and relate to one another" (1). The philosopher Luciano Floridi also argues we are living through a fourth modern revolution, an "information revolution," which is "affecting our sense of self, how we relate to each other, and how we shape and interact with our world" (6). The term "digital transformation" is often used to describe how we manage these rapid, profound, and irreversible changes. The pandemic introduced many churches to the concept of digital transformation, and as we imagine the post-pandemic church there is a unique opportunity to reflect on how technology may further advance the great ends of the church.

At a critical time, *The Distanced Church* appeared to provide rich insights into how church leaders were adapting ministries in the early months of the pandemic and into how these innovations might be understand in the context of digital transformation. At the beginning of the pandemic, churches employed and experimented with a mix of digital practices. As Pete Philips observed, some of these practices enabled traditional offline church activities to continue by broadcasting them online; others extended offline church by creating new ways of connecting and gathering through digital platforms; and some pursued disrupted practices such as virtual communion (73). Stephen Garner (2020) pointed out that, as churches shifted from pragmatic to more creative responses, they were moving from doing "church online" (the old church operating in a new environment) to becoming an "online church" (developing new practices).

Heidi Campbell described the digital strategies churches pursued as transferring, translating, and transforming. The easiest and perhaps most popular transition for churches during the pandemic was to move or transfer activities online without changing them much—especially through livestreaming, which a number of churches were doing long before the pandemic. Other churches, however, adapted and translated their activities through more interactive platforms such as videoconferencing. This enabled them to take advantage of new technological affordances, incorporating chat and distributed participants into services. The most innovative churches created entirely new forms of online engagement, leveraging the participatory nature of digital technologies through virtual interactions and events. Campbell (2020) noted how these new forms of church "more fully grasp the unique possibilities digital technology offers for community building and caring communication, as well as the chance to reimagine what it means to be a church in the digital age" (42).

In April 2020, Seattle Pacific University launched a Church Digital Transformation (CDx) project with funding from the M. J. Murdock Charitable Trust. By then it was already clear that church leaders needed new theological as well as technological resources to thrive in and beyond the pandemic, so we created the CDx project to provide church leaders in the Seattle area and beyond with resources for digitally transforming their churches (https://digitalcommons.spu.edu/churchdx/). Project activities included an interactive virtual summit to identify and discuss challenges; a series of video interviews with church leaders, theologians, and technologists to explore these challenges; and a curriculum for digital transformation based on these videos and other project-related resources (i).

In addition to helping with digital strategies for the pandemic, the project aimed to help church leaders explore how digital technologies can create new ways of being the church beyond more traditional places and patterns of engagement. Those of us leading SPU's CDx project were convinced that when churches were able resume more familiar routines, the life and mission of every thriving church would include an increasingly sophisticated digital dimension. Moreover, as churches moved through and beyond the pandemic, we expected new forms of church to emerge—digitally transformed churches, not merely digitally extended forms of pre-pandemic churches.

As the project progressed, discussions among project leaders and partners shifted from focusing on addressing immediate digital needs— which many of the churches we worked with seemed to have figured out —to thinking beyond digital transformation and imagining a condition of being post-digital. The "post" in post-digital signals a critical approach to the digital, as it does in the terms postmodern and posthuman. But "post" also more simply means after the digital has lost its salience— when digital technologies are a deeply integrated part of our lives and reality. Both meanings are important.

Churches has been on the path toward being post-digital for decades. First, churches digitized things and became comfortable with digital data; screens appeared in sanctuaries and websites were launched to share digital content. Next, churches digitalized processes and become comfortable with data processing systems, including streaming services online. Now, moving beyond these more straightforward conversions, churches are using digital technologies to transform what they do and how they do it—e.g., experimenting with new forms of fellowship through videoconferencing and other participatory platforms. What these transformations may lead to is not yet clear. Corporate worship experiences using immersive technologies such as augmented reality, or personalized digital discipleship using AI? As new technologically mediated forms of church life emerge, it is important for church leaders to be critically reflective and intentionally proactive in these transformations. The church, like any other organization, needs to shape its post-digital future to realize its own purpose and mission.

Technology and the church are both teleological, designed for a certain telos or end. Church leaders are faced with the challenge and opportunity to discover ways of leveraging transformative technologies for theological transformation. As Tom McLeish (2014) observes, theology, which "observes and construes stories," "can speak of, and ground, 'teleology'" (214).

The shared telos of Christians, new creation, is the first consideration for digital transformation. With this end in view, church leaders can explore how digital technologies are changing their ministry context. They then can cultivate formative technological practices that are aligned with their telos (ii). With all the technological change churches have realized during the last year, churches are better prepared and positioned to continue developing into something new. One may indeed wonder, as Angela Williams Gorrell did a year ago, if God might "be ushering us into a new reformation?" (2020).

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NOTES

(i) See the "The COVID-19 and the Digital Transformation of the Church" Summit site at: https://digitalcommons.spu.edu/churchdx_covid19/. Videos and other project-related content is available from the CDx Repository: https://digitalcommons.spu.edu/churchdxrepository/. A curriculum learning path is available from https://digitalcommons.spu.edu/churchdxrepository/40/ and through an online app: https://learncdx.theotech.org/.

(ii) These three moves are drawn from the "Church Digital Transformation Plan Template," available from https://works.bepress.com/michael_paulus/69/, which is based on Michael J. Paulus, Jr., Bruce D. Baker, and Michael D. Langford, "A Framework for Digital Wisdom in Higher Education," Christian Scholar's ReviewXLIX:1 (Fall 2019), 43-61, available from https://christianscholars.com/a-framework-for-digital-wisdom-in-higher-education/

#20

Conclusion: Lessons from Revisiting *The Distanced Church*

Heidi A Campbell and Sophia Osteen

The motivation behind compiling this eBook was to see what church leaders and scholars have learned over the past year of the pandemic about doing church online. Along with the consideration of what the relationship between the church and digital media looks like now, after a year of technological experimentations, and how this should develop in the future. *The Distanced Church* captured pastors and theologians first thoughts on what the mass migration of the church around the world to the internet in spring 2020 meant for churches as they experimented, most for the first time, with digital mediated worship.   A year later online or hybrid worship services has become a common experience for most churches, yet this does not mean this has been an easy shift. Essays from a year ago capture both the sense of being overwhelmed by this swift, forced move, and yet there was also a sense of excitement in many reflections about the new possibilities the digital transition might offer churches. Over the past year, many leaders have become comfortable at least with using digital media in their churches, but there is a noted sense of weariness and hints for burnout in some essays, as pastor have had to constantly adapt to new social safety restrictions effecting their work and gatherings, as the pandemic as drug on.

In *Revisiting the Distanced Church*, we hear both stories of success and challenges faced, but still not yet solved. Technology led alternatives of face-to-face gathering and church outreach have been implemented, but not without a financial and time cost to pastors already stretched in their work to care for their members. Digital alternatives to traditional gathering also were not always readily embraced by their members. Social distancing measures and masking mandates led to significant debates and tensions within some congregation, where pastors had to manage these constraints in order to care for their communities. In the face of these and other challenges pastors have had to jump in to responding to these new situations, with little time to reflect on the potential impact of their choices on church norms and their theological consequences. In these pages we have given space for leaders to pause for a few moments and share their stories about their successes and failures while mixing technology with liturgy and other religious practices.

We have also called on scholars to revisit the advice they offered a year ago, and what they saw as essential understanding for churches ethical and religious engagement with the digital. Here they reflect on what they got right, things they missed and issues they never even thought of that have emerged for church congregations seeking to live out online and hybrid forms of church. From these varied responses and reflection we see a number of key lessons rise to the surface, that point to potential conversations need about what the relationship between the church and technology should look like in the long run.

Key Lessons from Revisiting the Distanced Church

1. Leaders are willing and able to adapt, rethink, and innovate what church looks like.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, pastors, tech staff/volunteers, and church leaders demonstrated an ability to rethink the way that their churches have done "church" for years. A year later, pastors and scholars reflect with pride at how not only church services are being adapted to changing conditions and regulations related to the pandemic, but how leaders have engaged in true innovation their practices. We saw the swift modification of entrenched, traditional ideas about the nature of Christian worship, and what it looks like to foster community. Bryony Taylor explains that churches recognized that they were faced with dilemmas and had to learn how to do "church different." Similarly, Joanne Mercer explains that the past year "invigorated with what might be possible" within the church and in many ways, what some pastors and church leaders were avoiding.

Pastors have learned, become accustom to, and grown proficiency in both using and modifying digital technology to meet needs. As Michael Dormandy explains, going online gave them "flexibility of space and timing." After spending last year brainstorming and implementing technology-driven forms of church, they are now seeing and reaping the benefits digital technologies afford. These adaptation challenges the model that the church is always slow and resistant to change, while raising the conversation about what aspects of these innovations should be seen as short term or long term solutions. How might this forced rethinking of the church experiment point towards a greater need for the church in general to adopt or adapt to other cultural trends?

2. The Church has changed, but so have the people.

As the world has moved and been modified over the past fifteen months, one could argue that little seems to remain the same after the COVID-19 dominated year of 2020. The church has been no exception to this. They experienced major shifts and difficulties during this period where social distancing has forced people into isolation, and its defining activity of communal gatherings had to be abandoned. Joanne Mercer explains that as things change, "so must we." As the COVID-19 pandemic has forced changes within the church and even the world, scholars and pastors remark that so have congregant's attitudes. Silverkors explains that church members have slowly become more familiar with or used to online communication, making the distance between "real" versus "online" even smaller.

Scholars also note that church congregation's views about technology have also shifted. Ilona Nord and Oliver Adam explain how as the year has progressed, congregants are no longer "hyped" or "fearful" of technology, but instead, they tend to be "neutral" as they have gotten used to its presence in the church. Congregations often now view technology as necessary, even inevitable. This they see as a simple fact without expressing either a particular excitement or dislike for this new reality. After a year of online worship, Zach Lambert explains how post-pandemic church congregants are desperate for mission work. To moves not just outside the church, but outside into the community in general. After a difficult year where outreach was often limited, many long to help their community together with others. As one scholar notes, the rhythm of the church and the people within them are both changed post-2020. This suggests the need to consider how church mission and previous forms of outreach may need to change too. This is especially true when members see the church missions as based around a communal experience and outward looking connections.

3. "We are living in hard times" still!

As churches have endured their doors being closed and discomfort created by social distancing policies, it was pastors who most often who had to make such difficult decisions regarding how to run their churches safely. These were not simple choices to make. Pastors were balancing a variety of roles and social-communal pressures while also attempting to grieve and navigate a global pandemic. One that has caused the loss of millions of people's lives.

More than a year later, it would be remiss to not consider the impact that COVID-19 has played on the mental and physical health of both pastors and church leaders.

Stephen Evoy explains his own difficulties as a pastor and asserts that: "we are living in hard times." Theologian Stephen Garner also explains that pastors, youth leaders, and church volunteers/staff have spent the last year "reacting, responding, supporting, encouraging and adapting it is no surprise that weariness, exhaustion, and trauma amongst those who have been supporting both their church and wider communities."

And while the USA seems to be ramping up towards a post-Covid reality, other parts of the world are still facing difficult situation while they wait for the vaccine to become fully available to their communities and congregations. These hard times of COVID-19 are not over for many sectors of the church, and leaders who are already worn out. This begs the question, how might churches need to modify their expectation during this next season? Will we give time and space to pastors and staff who themselves need to rest and heal? Or we simply push through to get back quickly back to a business-as-usual schedule of programs? How does the church created space to provide spiritual and emotional triage for its leaders and members?

4. Are churches doing enough to build community through technology?

As many churches moved primarily online in historic and innovative ways, congregants also began to feel the loss of key elements associated with the realities of a digital church. Online, mediated worship often accentuated the social or community gap people experienced during this pandemic. In this eBook, pastors and scholars alike wondered if they are doing "enough" to address this need. Silverkors asks, in a time where people are lonelier than ever, digital mediums as a form of community may not be "enough." Lambert echoes this feeling in explaining that congregant still longs for connections, despite being online and having their church service available. Matthew John Paul Tan eloquently explains that in his own experience, "I sensed that their [fellow congregants'] pixelated manifestations, mediated further by servers around the world, could incarnate the presence of Christ's Body and His Communion. However, it could only do so to a point. The longer I spoke to my friends in these places, the more I desired to be with them, that I might fully incarnate that communion."

Despite the innovation and creativity demonstrated in taking the church online, church members still articulated a sense of loss for missing social elements of church that digital technology cannot provide.

This now requires leaders and scholars to reflect on how digital and hybrid church can be designed from the very beginning with social interactions and communal opportunities in line. We need to collect and document positive examples of how this was achieved by churches during the pandemic. As many churches consider hybrid, online-offline combinations of church services and community activities as a long term strategy, the need to create and implement relational forms of digital ministry becomes essential. Just because a church uses social media, it does not mean they are facilitating social interactions online. Community must be intentionally cultivated when using digital media. What have we learned about this during the pandemic that we need to implement long term to make online church truly a community-based experience?

5. What will hybrid church look like?

Churches and pastors have spent the last year navigating the switch from offline church to online church. As churches re-open and countries end mask mandates along with social distancing restrictions, pastors and church leaders are now faced with questions regarding what a post-pandemic church will look like. Cheri Kroon explains that there seems to have been a spiritual shift in the church in response to the physical shift brought on by COVID-19. She describes this as though the "church is laid bare", revealing its strengths and weaknesses for all to see.   This "bare" church reveals many questions and concerns for church leadership to consider. What aspects of church were most missed by congregants during the pandemic? What does that say about what the church represents for its members and the greater culture? In what ways was the pre-pandemic church not meeting the needs of its members? Was if truly focused on serving the greater culture through mission? It is evident from many of these essays both leaders and others are not wanting to return fully to church as it once was. Some even prefer online worship, as it is "easier" because of the flexibility it offers people schedules.

Some see the hybrid church as the answer, meeting the desire of different populations within the church. During this period, pastors seem to be wondering: will the hybrid church solve the problem of dwindling congregations, or people who have become used to a more consumer-focused church experienced during the pandemic? What could, or should the hybrid church look like? To what extent should it adapt to digital technology trends or practices, and to what extent should it mirror more traditional forms of church?

Ralf Peter Reimann highlights the crux of this issue when he asserts that pastors have had to ask: "what is essential to the church?" The hybrid church is not a new one-size-fits-all model of church. It can take many forms, and requires leaders to reflect deeply on what church should look like in contemporary culture, as well as in online and offline space. In asking this deeper theological questions leaders will be better equipped to implement a hybrid church strategy, whatever that may be.

6. Some theological questions explored, while others still linger.
Finally, this past year has placed the church in the midst of many difficult theological issues debates, through moving the core of its ministry online, even if just for a short time. Digital version of church raises many debates. These include what aspects or rituals of the church must be embodied? How do we define and live out religious community online? Moisés Sbardelotto explains that COVID-19 marked a point in which churches "explicitly recognize[d] that ecclesial religious experiences in the digital environment are real, and a real point of no return." While digital and hybrid forms of church have generated some in-depth and interesting theological discussions churches, some answers and questions seem to linger. Peter Philips explains one such question related to the Eucharist in a hybrid setting: "Who gets to be a member of the body of Christ in a Church which states that access to the Lord's Supper is limited wholly to those who can be present physically when the church decides to meet?" Many questions other also remain, such as, at what point does the practice technologically mediating liturgy transform or conflict our understanding of what the church is called to be in the world? Questions like these will continue to remain important areas of theological reflection for some time.