



## The Digital Divide, Digital Reluctance and their Impact on Pandemic Churches

### FINDING—

***During the pandemic, many church leaders had to learn to manage the digital divide within their congregations. Research found this technology gap was primarily due to poor internet access within churches, age-related technology issues in congregations, and leaders' own reluctance towards digital media.***

While much has been written on the challenges that American churches faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, one factor not often discussed is that many churches lacked basic access to digital technology and internet connectivity in early 2020. For the first time, small and rural religious congregations experienced the full impact of the digital divide as they struggled to get online and stay connected.

The digital divide is a term commonly used to describe the gap between digital haves and have-nots. In other words, those who have easy access to digital information via computers, smartphones, and the internet, and those who do not (Van Dijk, 2006). Digital divides can be caused by different issues, including limited sustainable communication infrastructure, the high cost of technology, deficits in local computer networks, or even gaps in knowledge about digital media.

Churches in our study of congregational technology use faced many such issues, including having to deal with insufficient communication infrastructure, connecting technologies, or digital training. Such setbacks, especially in the early days of the pandemic, impacted the digital transition of congregations online greatly. While the lack of digital media knowledge and training affecting churches were discussed in the first Tech Trend Paper, “Needed, but Lacking: Impact of Pastors' Technology Background During the Pandemic,” here, we explore other themes related to the lack of digital infrastructure and barriers to technological entry encountered by congregations.

Besides the standard trio of Digital Divide issues—namely, deficits in infrastructure, technology, and training—many churches experienced a unique fourth factor. This fourth factor could be described as digital reluctance as some church leaders actively pushed back from engaging in digital media, despite some congregation members' desire to engage in digital services. This resistance to digital or online worship was motivated by several factors explored in this paper,

including a general uneasiness with technology, a fear of change, or not having access to or skills in using digital tools. While this could be described as less of an issue in access and more of an attitude of hesitancy or resistance, these issues still generated or reinforced a digital divide within some congregations. Technology haves and have-nots were reframed as digital media users and non-users conflicted with one another.

Researchers found many church leaders did not have a strategy for dealing with digital divide issues of both access and user resistance during the pandemic. Instead, they embraced a trial and error problem-solving outlook. First, they took on technology access issues with a "try and see if it works" approach, working on getting a hold of resources to get service online. Next, dealing with the technology resistance often became a secondary concern after they had managed to make their services technologically accessible. However, this also did not mean that creating a plan and structure for live streaming services meant that they successfully solved their access issues. Some church leaders in this study shared that they continue to face digital divide stumbling blocks, especially with internet connectivity. Yet despite these challenges, many pastors reported that they saw notable benefits in running digital services, despite continuing to struggle with practical issues and ideological digital divides in their church.

Using feedback from church leaders in Indiana as a part of the research for the "Tech in Churches During the Covid-19" project, this paper explores the many obstacles church leaders encountered in trying to overcome technology access and attitudinal stumbling blocks found in their congregations. This paper suggests that churches encountered both standard and unique divides related to the digital divide during the pandemic which necessitated unique strategies for bridging the divide for congregations.

### **Obstacles creating a digital divide within churches**

The top three digital divide obstacles that leaders faced when forced to move church services online included issues related to (1) church accessibility to internet infrastructure, (2) the generational digital divide in access and understanding of digital technologies, and (3) digitally reluctant church leaders resistant to technology.

#### **1. Churches with limited internet accessibility**

Throughout the multiple focus group sessions, church leaders often stressed that connectivity challenges to the internet in their geographical location or place of worship was an obstacle that furthered the digital divide. Unfortunately, many church leaders were unaware that poor connectivity would be an issue until they attempted to move church services online. One church leader discovered in 2020 that when the pandemic forced his church to go digital, he found the church "in need of a stronger internet signal." He elaborated that when they added the needed "speed to the internet" to run the online services, it resulted in another cost they had not anticipated or budgeted for. Another leader described their church's internet access inadequacies as beyond and

insufficient “a foundational issue in the digital age for many of the underserved congregations.”

Dealing with inadequate internet access meant creative problem-solving. Some pastors were “producing their sermons out of their homes until the internet speed could be made efficient enough in the church building for live streaming.” Another respondent stated they “want to get away from using members' personal items.” Churches going online often realized their local internet provider options were not adequate, even with the Church purchasing their own iPads and forms of technology to access other ways to connect. They noted that “internet [at the church] is always a problem,” resulting in many pastors working from home or utilizing their personal cell phones to connect due to the poor internet access at the sanctuary.

A continued frustration for many churches throughout the pandemic was the lack of internet access as well as poor connectivity. These ongoing obstacles related to access often compound church leadership's hesitancy and willingness to extend running digital services once COVID-19 restrictions are lifted.

## **2. The generational digital divide in churches**

Another obstacle that many churches faced could be described as a generational digital divide between church members. Alhatou (2021) explains that a generational digital divide results when a younger generation that has achieved digital literacy and grown up in a world pervasive with technology seeks to advocate for technology to an older generation introduced to digital technology later in life. Church leaders described the generational digital divide of older congregants not using or knowing how to use many digital devices as an obstacle, in contrast to younger congregants who have grown up utilizing technology daily.

Respondents acknowledged that utilizing digital media for worship services often excludes older members who are unfamiliar with technology and cited this as an additional reason for church leadership's reluctance to continue with online services once the pandemic restrictions are lifted. One respondent stated, “when your average [member's] age is 70 years old, it's hard to make changes.”

Other leaders shared that they saw a generational divide in people's initial response to the idea of doing church online. Since younger members were more familiar and adept at utilizing technology, most were supporters early on. However, older members who were typically less engaged with technology feared they might lose intimate connections with other congregants when services were offered completely online. Leaders also shared that both they as well as the older congregational members experienced “FOMO,” or a fear of missing out, on the perceived opportunities digital media offers. One pastor explained that the fear of missing out eventually convinced

him, and others in his church who were digitally hesitant, of the vital need to embrace church online:

"I think we should be concerned as pastors; we want them to know Jesus. It has become a new missionary field. Some of those folks who haven't returned, some of the "nones," have been going to service because of social pressure. Some folks have discovered they can sleep in on a Sunday or go to brunch. Nothing wrong with that, but it affects our lives in the community. Our seniors were taught that you were here every Sunday, so they're ready to be back. But that's not the case with our younger people."

Another pastor echoed this by adding:

"The whole concept of Sunday is shifting and changing in terms of family and connecting with their faith...A lot of young families were not coming back right away. I wonder if there are pushes and pulls; now that it's available online, they are watching it (services) later in the day online. It's just part of the shift now in the Christian faith... we've got to figure out how to reach them, or we're going to miss a generation."

Pastoral concerns related to the generational digital divide they saw emerging in their churches were two-fold. First, they were concerned about elderly members' ability and/or willingness to participate in digital services. Second, they worried about missing a personal connection with younger congregants by continuing digital worship services as they developed new forms of religious engagement during the pandemic.

### **3. Digital reluctance from church leaders**

Many churches encountered a unique obstacle: their pastor or another senior church leader expressed reluctance towards investing in technology. Sometimes this hesitance was carried over from their position to technology prior to the pandemic. For others, this resistance was first noted when church members advocated for creating digital worship services during the pandemic. By "digital reluctance," we mean when individuals, organizations, businesses, or in this case, churches, have the means and opportunity to utilize technology and digital services yet are slow or apprehensive about going digital. As illustrated in our first Tech Trend paper, the lack of enthusiasm for going digital is often rooted in church leaders' lack of experience or being uncomfortable with technology in general. However, besides concerns about increased cost and time to invest in technology, digital reluctance is also rooted in the less talked about component of aversion to change. Humans, by nature, are often apprehensive about changes occurring to their environment, which require involuntary adaptation. Therefore it is not surprising that pandemic-driven changes that required adapting to a

new way of doing things, such as church worship services, gave rise to this digital reluctance within congregations

When leaders reflected on this difficulty to adapt to the new technological requirements, they noted that it is often the response of the more historical mainline and liturgical churches. This was described as having an "old school mentality," where understandings of church worship focus solely on events occurring within the church's walls. For example, one respondent recalled that their church leadership "never had an interest in going online" and that their pastor was "very anti-tech." Another church leader echoed the first, stating that they "came kicking and screaming into technology." Another added, "if it's not broken, don't fix it," suggesting a strong resistance to trying new ways of performing worship.

Others stated their hesitancy or reluctance toward technology stemmed from having a lack of time to engage with learning new digital technology prior to the pandemic. This heightened their unwillingness to initially consider utilizing digital media to do their services online and often prevented congregations from transitioning to digital church sooner. One pastor recalled his own reluctance to going digital, saying, "[one congregant] asked about Facebooking our service, and I said, that's the stupidest idea!" The pastor then shared that he informed the congregant that he did not have the time to add a digital service but encouraged them to take it on. The pastor stated, "now he's heading up a ministry in our church!" Many church leaders admitted their personal reluctance towards investing in and utilizing technology was a primary reason their church's strongly felt the impacts of a digital divide once the COVID-19 restrictions forced their services online.

## **Conclusion**

Ultimately, the COVID-19 pandemic created an awareness of a digital divide between congregations that lacked access to the internet, the shifting times between generations, and how a general reluctance to invest in technology prior to the pandemic was a setback when they were required to move online. For many churches, the markers of the digital divide still exist, such as struggling with limited or poor access to the internet due to local infrastructure or high costs for access. Yet despite these challenges, churches that are willing and who took on digital worship services also noted some surprising and unique benefits from their willingness to navigate these digital divides. As we noted in our first report, "When Pastors Put on the 'Tech hat': How Churches Digitized During Covid-19," leaders felt that through online services, they could reach more people and welcome more visitors than they had before the pandemic. They also reported reconnecting with members who had relocated to other parts of the country or world, such as those in college or those in military service or doing missionary work abroad.

Furthermore, several church leaders felt that they could better connect with homebound members online and offer them a new sense of community and social connection, which they

had not been able to prior to the pandemic forcing services online. Other pastors shared they quickly realized many of their elderly members were eager to learn how to use the new technology so they could engage online. This desire of seniors to cross the digital divide was motivated by the hope of staying connected with their church and friends, and families during the pandemic. Also, many younger congregants who struggled to find their place prior to COVID-19 were able to use their technological skills and volunteers to assist older members in using the new technology and software. This unplanned partnership with technology further helped churches address the generational digital divide they were faced with early in the pandemic.

While many leaders in this study reflected on their own initial digital hesitancy prior to the pandemic, they reported their views changed once they embraced digital worship. One such pastor experienced "delight" and "definite surprise" in learning about the many benefits digital resources provide their church's ministry. So, while the question: "what will Church look like from here on out?" remains, one thing is certain: the awareness of the digital divide within churches and willingness to develop strategies to overcome it will continue and likely grow as church leaders move past their digital hesitancy and consider taking church online as a long-term strategy.

***Key Takeaways: Understanding the Digital Divide in Churches during the Pandemic***

**1) Internet access and technology accessibility are still challenging for small, more rural congregations.**

Internet access and connectivity continue to be an issue for many congregations. This obstacle furthers the digital divide as pastors struggle to balance face-to-face services and still provide a digital service for those who cannot return.

**2) The generational digital divide, promoted by members' disparate experiences with technology, created challenges and unique opportunities for churches to adopt digital worship.**

Respondents noted that many of their younger congregants grew up using technology and have achieved digital literacy and proved helpful consultants for online building services. However, technology access and use for many of their older members did not come easy. This generational digital divide also highlighted how technological curiosity and mentoring could help bridge this gap and facilitate greater investment in online worship in the future.

**3) Despite making the digital transition to online services during the pandemic, some churches still struggle with digital hesitancy within their leadership.**

Challenges with learning new technology, poor internet access or connectivity, and the struggle with preaching to two different congregations, both online and offline, and

older congregants and younger congregants add to church leadership's hesitancy to continue with digital services in the future.

### **Summary of Research Project and Context**

This tech trend paper examines specific findings of how churches engaged with technology that emerged from the *Tech in Churches during COVID-19* research project funded by the Lilly Endowment. This project investigates congregations' technological negotiations and decision-making patterns in the American Midwest during the COVID-19 pandemic. This report is put together by the *Network for New Media, Religion and Digital Culture Studies* under the direction of Dr. Heidi A Campbell. It analyzes data provided by the Center for Congregations in Indianapolis, Indiana, through its "Connect Through Tech" grant program, which funded 2700 congregations in the state of Indiana to purchase technology resources in 2020 and 2021 to help facilitate the move from traditional to online services. Here, we highlight themes emerging from a series of "Tech Talk" sessions facilitated by the Center for Congregational Leaders who received grants where technology challenges and opportunities emerging from the shift online were discussed.

- ***Reported prepared by Heidi A Campbell & Mandy M. Jordan (April 2022)***

### **SOURCES**

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