Report 2 Executive Summary of
Mission to Serve Tech: Churches "Lock Down" Technology During the Global Pandemic
How the Pandemic Influenced Pastors' and Churches' Views of Using Technology to Serve Members and Mission

"Mission to Serve Tech: Churches 'Lock Down' Tech during the Global Pandemic" is a 48-page report released in February of 2023 that explores how pastors used technology to support their congregation and their mission during the early stages of the pandemic. The report analyzes the survey responses from the data collected through the "Connect Through Tech" grant program of the Center for Congregations in Indianapolis, which supported more than 2700 congregations across Indiana in 2020 and 2021 by providing them with funds. Many congregations were eager to receive grants to help ease their transition from traditional offline meetings to online services after the COVID-19 outbreak. Churches acquired streaming services mainly to facilitate the transition to online services.

The report explores the questions: (1) how were the grant funds utilized to support the church's needs during the COVID-19 pandemic? (2) How does each church or pastoral team view the function and purpose of technology? (3) What are the definitions of the church's mission and community? (4) How do churches and pastors view and conceptualize the relationship between religion and technology? And finally, (5) what are the new challenges and opportunities technology created and revealed for church leaders? The results of this study of pastors', congregations', and churches' attitudes toward technology can be summed in four key points:

<u>**Technology as a Needed Blessing:**</u> The churches lacked the technological resources and funds to make digital purchases at the start of the pandemic, which they quickly realized that they required.

- The grant funds were praised by the church applicants as a "financial blessing" that enabled them to get the essential technological resources that they needed to move services online. More than 80% of the pastors used CTT funding to purchase a digital camera and/or video equipment because they found themselves unprepared with even basic technology equipment. Many churches had to use church leaders' computers or personal cell phones as cameras and microphones during the first few months of the pandemic.
- Pastors and leaders focused on purchasing equipment that would allow them to live

stream services quickly. The move towards the online church was not about embarking on a new era of discipleship, but about simply being able to produce "online" meetings.

Pandemic Church Culture focused on Serving via Tech: Church leaders made it their mission to learn how to use technology, primarily to keep their church running.

- The focus of the church shifted as pastors moved from focusing their work on their building to transferring their attention to building up their technology platforms to support their work. About 40% of churches saw technology as an essential tool during the COVID-19 pandemic, and as the only practical way to continue their service to members and provide worship experiences. Leaders often equated technology use with the act of sustaining community connections during this difficult time.
- Many leaders noticed that their "normal" programs were now reaching new attendees, shut-ins, and nursing home residents by becoming an "online church." After a year of technology usage, leaders often highlighted how it revealed how they could reach previously unreached groups. They spoke enthusiastically about continuing this work for the sake of the digitally-mediated community and the potential for outreach that was revealed by the pandemic.

Testing Tech and the Church: "Testing, 1, 2, 3..." was not just about experimenting with technology, but about reflecting on what it meant to create community and be the "church."

- Many leaders also saw their conceptualizations of what the definition of the church being put to the test alongside their use of new technology and software. Church leaders and congregations reported that embracing technology and being willing to try new ways of congregating enabled them to grow and become more resilient as a group.
- About 80% of churches in this study reported having previously ignored or denied using social media and technology in their churches. However, the social constraints of the pandemic forced them to reconsider and consider the benefits of how churches could use digital resources to serve their members.

Tech Growth Seen in Small and Rural Towns: The grant helped fostered the growth of not only online churches but also of "digital towns."

- Around 70% of applicants who received the CTT grant funds were those from small, rural towns or cities, and often those with limited digital resources in their communities. Many of these congregation described themselves as regularly struggling for resources, even before the pandemic. These tech grants offered them their only option for assistance during the pandemic. Without tech, they would have been socially or communicatively cut off from the

members they served.
- These churches often mentioned the general misunderstanding and lack of awareness of how technology limits and deficits impact low-income rural communities, like theirs, which struggled to acquire technology.

Overall, the report explores the lessons, struggles, and successes Indiana churches encountered during the pandemic related to technology. Their experience reflects themes consistent with reports from other small, Midwest congregations adopting digital media and moving online for the first time. They quickly realized that keeping their Church alive and running during the pandemic required a technological solution. This report is part of a larger research project that analyzed the church's and tech's decision-making processes during the pandemic. *Tech In Churches During COVID-19* is a research project funded by the Lilly Endowment that explores the evolving relationship between technology and religious congregations. The project is led by Heidi A. Campbell, who is a professor of Communication and Presidential Impact Fellow at Texas A&M University and director of the Network for New Media, Religion, and Digital Culture Studies.

For more information about the research project, please see:
https://www.techinchurches.org/

The full copy of Report Two can be found at:
https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/handle/1969.1/197075