



## Embracing Pastoral Entrepreneurship during the Pandemic: Traits needed to be an Effective Digital Pastor

### FINDING—

*Church leaders reported having success working with technology during the pandemic, but moving online for church services required taking on a new set of traits. The traits pastors identified as essential are typically more closely associated with entrepreneurship than pastoral ministry.*

During the COVID-19 pandemic, pastors were required to take on new roles, such as serving as social media managers, digital designers and technology innovators. Our research reveals a distinct set of traits described by pastors as required in order for them to be successful while engaging with technology during this time. These traits are more commonly associated with an entrepreneurial role, than the traditional role of a pastor. Therefore, the pandemic thrust pastors out of their traditional roles into a new position and areas of expertise, requiring them to embrace often uncomfortable entrepreneurial traits such as risk-taking, experimentation, dynamic adaptation, and ambiguity.

### **Essential Digital Pastoral Traits Identified**

Our research finds that Pastors and church leaders report that they were required to act in new ways to fulfill their job and calling during the pandemic. Respondents specifically mentioned the following traits during the CTT sessions of our study as those that were essential for pastors or church leaders to demonstrate to be successful and faithfully execute their jobs as the first COVID-19 lockdown started in the United States in March 2020. These five traits are:

- (1) A Willingness to Experiment:** Pastors, volunteers, and church leaders demonstrated a willingness to learn new tasks and equipment during the pandemic, despite that they frequently reported a lack of knowledge and experience in those areas. Pastors described brainstorming novel ways to host services, plan events, and re-imagine “gatherings” amid restrictions. Our findings reported most pastors' demonstrated willingness to innovate and try out new ways of providing church services. For example, one pastor described individually bagging each communion wafer and personally distributing them to cars at a parking lot Easter service in 2020 that he designed by himself.
- (2) Flexibility and Adaptive Responses:** Although they often felt out of their depth of experience, pastors and leaders were prepared to learn and demonstrated flexibility and adaptability despite constantly changing health and safety guidelines. Leaders showed that they could be flexible and adapt quickly to the restrictions and modify their traditional worship services' practices. Even though most reported having no pre-existing technological skills, church leaders often showed a commitment to learning how to use different digital media as quickly as possible due to the forced circumstance. One Jewish leader described having a “very meaningful” Passover celebration online with his congregation, as he

encouraged them to bring a computer to the dinner table so they could appear to share the challah bread via Zoom. Leaders demonstrated despite restrictions, they were able to be flexible and adapt quickly to the restrictions modify their traditional practices.

- (3) Creative Thinking and Innovative Action:** Pastors and leaders were creative in planning church events during the pandemic. Church leaders embraced imagining and trying innovative options in planning services and designing opportunities for community interaction. For example, pastors realized what their congregations needed most during the pandemic were connection and community. Many designed weekly Bible studies and small groups around Zoom or created “chatroom” options during livestreams of services so members could encourage one another, “react” to the service, or catch up. The church coffee hour after service was also reimagined online.
- (4) Tenacity and Dedication to Job:** Church leaders demonstrated a strong commitment and dedication to keeping some form of church services and activities, despite the abundant challenges, especially when in-person gatherings were not permitted. They recognized that more than ever, their congregations needed the church at this time, and this need often kept them going when they were weary. One church pastor described setting aside a portion of each day to call individual members of his congregations to check in on them and pray for them. He viewed making time for his members as his responsibility as a pastor and something he would typically do as part of his Sunday routine even if it required technological modification.
- (5) Resourcefulness and Strategic Decision-Making:** Pastors and volunteers diligently addressed the new challenges they faced. Most reported doing lots of independent online research and using traditional church resources to create alternative approaches to face-to-face ministry. The ability to evaluate options and think strategically about the impact of different choices was viewed as crucial for churches at this time. This was especially true when leaders had to determine what technologies to purchase, how digital copyright laws work, and how to create accessible church service amid the pandemic. One church leader described spending many hours researching digital equipment intently to determine the best purchases to make. Altogether, church leaders demonstrated their ability to be resourceful and intentional in their decision-making process during the pandemic.

### **Pandemic Pastoral Entrepreneurship: Church Leaders as Reluctant Entrepreneurs**

We find that the unique set of traits discussed here are those not traditionally associated with the role of a pastor. Pastors are often described as having characteristics such as leadership, compassion, loyalty, humility, and accountability, or executing roles such as a teacher, overseer, and counselor. However, the qualities listed above are typically associated with “entrepreneurs” who develop an enterprise or business around an innovation. There are many different characteristics associated with entrepreneurship and being an entrepreneur. Entrepreneurship’s “Big Five,” suggested by Vecchio (2003), is often used in Business and Management Studies as way to rank and evaluate an individual’s likelihood of being a successful entrepreneur. This list highlights individuals who desire a locus of control, need for autonomy and achievements to flourish, have a high risk-taking propensity, and possess a strong sense of self-efficacy. Others argue entrepreneurs are those who can be described as self-starters, willing to experiment and fail, have a strong tolerance for ambiguity, and desire to make new products or opportunities possible for others (Boyd & Vozikis, 1994).

What is common amongst these definitions, and many others, is that entrepreneurs have both a high tolerance for risk and ambiguity and a desire for a creative and competitive environment. Pastors are typically not viewed as individuals who desire or embrace uncertainty, risk, or competition. It is also true that these qualities are not typically emphasized in seminary or other training programs that prepare people for role of the pastor. While the “Pastorpreneur” concept was made popular in the 2000s, the image and idea of a pastor functioning in part as a shepherd and partly as a CEO/ business innovator has been contested as a potentially problematic framing of church leadership. The term Pastorpreneur was coined by John Jackson, who described the need for leaders who were “willing and able to implement techniques within [the] church and community that may be considered different by more orthodox or traditional leaders, all with the intent of growing their church and community through their ministry efforts” (2004, p. 8).

However, it was not until the spring 2020 that many church leaders had ever even considered embracing such a position. Business scholars have noted that redefining one’s work or job during the pandemic was not unusual. Many workers found themselves pushed out of their original jobs, and required to take on or invent new roles. Mark Cannish (2020) has argued that the economic downturn brought on by the global COVID-19 pandemic had a cumulative effect on many workers. The workers in question include scientists, engineers, and business professionals, as many found themselves out of work or unable to do the job for which they were trained due to layoffs or market shifts. Many felt their only option was to join the wave of entrepreneurship, needing to create new jobs and take on new roles to survive financially at this time. The same could be argued of many pastors who were forced to take on new entrepreneurial roles within their churches and religious organizations.

Embracing or rapidly developing any of these five characteristics mentioned above enabled church leaders to make the required innovative technological transitions for their church to survive. However, even though church leaders identified these entrepreneurial characteristics, often early on in their move from traditional to digital worship, this was an uncomfortable and reluctant shift on their part of many pastors. This means pastors could most closely be identified with what some business scholars call “reluctant entrepreneurs,” or individuals with strong managerial skills and some entrepreneurial-like behaviors but adverse to risk and ambiguity in their jobs (Yaniv & Brock 2012). Reluctant entrepreneurs are compelled to draw on this background in a new context or environment for their professional survival. While reluctant entrepreneurs may possess principal skills and traits to help them make this entrepreneurial shift, it is typically an uncomfortable repositioning. This feeling of unease can result in considerable stress due to the uncertainty caused by unfamiliar job requirements and the new environment in which they are called to work. Further discussion of “pandemic pastor as reluctant entrepreneurs” and what church leaders can learn from this experience will be the subject of a forthcoming research paper.

### ***Key Takeaways: Understanding Pastoral Entrepreneurship during the Pandemic***

#### **1) Technology demands meant embracing new, often uncomfortable, character traits.**

Pastors were called upon to cultivate strong entrepreneurial traits they did not possess or had not previously developed, such as creative experimentation, task orientation, a drive to achieve, and problem-solving. Just like reluctant entrepreneurs, they typically had a lower threshold or tolerance for risk and ambiguity. So, some traits required of leaders to make the shift online successfully seemed in direct contradiction to their training and experience of working in a church environment.

**2) Most leaders reported they were unprepared and overwhelmed dealing with change.**

As pastors were forced into new roles that they were not trained for, many reported experiencing high levels of uncertainty and exhaustion over the pandemic. This resulted in high anxiety is due to the fact they have been required to act outside of their comfort zone for extended periods without much support or relief. This reality could account for the high levels of burn-out or mental health issues being reported by pastors over a year and a half into the pandemic.

**3) Pastors Often Had to Innovate in Solitude.**

Typically, pastors and church leaders work in environments supported by their congregation, staff, and/or volunteers that assist with programming. However, the COVID-19 pandemic created an atmosphere where many pastors had to work in solitude as they navigated these shifts by themselves. Online services in small churches often meant pastors had to simultaneously serve as a preacher, media producers, tech crew, and online promoters. These responsibilities often fell to pastors because volunteers often lacked experience or hesitated to offer technology advice.

**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 in which technology challenges and opportunities emerging from the shift online were discussed.

- **Reported prepared by Heidi A Campbell & Sophia Osteen (Feb 2022)**

**SOURCES**

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